

THE PEOPLE'S TYPOGRAPHY:

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A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC ACCOUNT ON THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN 'TOWNSHIP TYPOGRAPHY' AND SOUTH AFRICAN
MAINSTREAM CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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DECLARATION

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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SUMMARY

This thesis presents an analysis of 'township typography' as a complex visual dialect generated by various economic and historical factors within the South African social landscape. A combination of specific tools, skills-sets and applications has produced a body of typographic letterforms that can be visually distinguished from standardised letterforms found in mainstream typography. Due to the origin of these letterforms, as well as their distinct appearance, 'township typography' has the capacity to evoke specific social, cultural or demographic structures in systems of communication. This study reveals that typographic features from 'township typography' are drawn into mainstream cultural production, particularly in the field of local advertising, as the result of a complex process of incorporation and institutional consecration.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie tesis bied 'n analise van 'township tipografie' as 'n komplekse visuele dialek wat gegenerereer word deur verskeie ekonomiese en historiese faktore eie aan die Suid-Afrikaanse sosiale landskap. Die spesifieke kombinasie van gereedskap, vaardighede en aanwendings lei tot 'n liggaam van lettertipes wat visueel onderskei kan word van die standaard wat in hoofstroom tipografie voorkom. Vanweë hierdie dialek se oorsprong, asook die kenmerkende voorkoms daarvan, het 'township tipografie' die vermoë om spesifieke sosiale, kulturele en demografiese strukture in kommunikasie op te roep. Hierdie studie toon hoe eienskappe eie aan 'township tipografie' weens 'n komplekse proses van inkorporasie en institusionele inseëning in hoofstroom kulturele produksie opgeneem word, veral op die gebied van plaaslike advertensiewese.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis offers an analysis of the relationship between ‘township typography’ and South African mainstream cultural production. My contention is that ‘township typography’¹ is a complex visual dialect generated by various economic and historical factors within the South African social landscape. This dialect has the capacity to implicate specific social, cultural or demographic structures into forms of communication, particularly in the field of local advertising.

By drawing on the work of Michel Halliday, specifically as outlined in his book *Language as Social Semiotic* (1978), I employ a Social Semiotic² approach to the relationship between ‘township typography’ and South African mainstream cultural production. In addition, I supplement Halliday’s linguistic formulation of Social Semiotics by making generous use of work from the Paris School of semiotics, specifically Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1972), as well as the Sydney semiotic circle, primarily by drawing on Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen’s *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* (2001). This specific Social Semiotic framework largely adopts (and adapts) the initial work of Russian linguist, Roman Jakobson (albeit with a Hallidayan twist); a framework that differs considerably, and often profoundly, from the traditional Saussurean and Piercian semiotic

¹ I first came across the phrase ‘township typography’ a few years ago on graphic designer and copywriter Shane Durrant’s personal website (Durrant [Online]). His website presented a collection of various South African vernacular letterforms; he primarily focused on specific typographic instances that shared certain visual and linguistic features, and he colloquially referred to these examples as ‘township typography’. In a personal interview I conducted with him (Durrant, Electronic Interview, 8 May 2011 [see Addendum B]) he admitted that the term ‘township typography’ is somewhat misleading, since his documentation is largely restricted to urban areas and city centres, however he believes that the label “conveyed the right sentiment” (*ibid.*). In accordance with Durrant, I admit that ‘township typography’ is not exclusively confined to South African informal settlements. Despite the divergence and convolution that might underscore ‘township typography’ as a concept, I am of the opinion that certain stylistic features found in this dialect can be traced to the nature of life in South African informal settlements. ‘Township typography’ is a complex and loaded category – hence my placement of the term in single quotation marks – and it refers broadly to letterforms created in informal settlements, while it also underscores a stylistic formation that has spread past the physical confines of South African informal settlements.

² I capitalise the term in order to indicate that I am referring to ‘Social Semiotics’ as a specific school of thought. My employment of the term as a proper noun contrasts it to a generalised conception of a socio-cultural informed approach to semiotics.

models. In light of this, I briefly examine the main points underscoring my own theoretical stance.

First and foremost, Social Semiotics shifts the focus from the 'sign' to the way in which people use semiotic 'resources', both to produce communicative artefacts, and to interpret them. Secondly, instead of constructing separate accounts for the various semiotic modes (or "channels" (Halliday 1978: 189) of communication – such as visual, written, gestural or musical, among others – Social Semiotics accounts for contemporary semiotic artefacts as an integration of various modes of communication. Thirdly, instead of describing semiotic modes as though they have intrinsic characteristics or inherent 'laws', Social Semiotics acknowledges that semiotic resources are shaped and regulated by dynamic and changing social forces within specific social practices and institutions. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Social Semiotics recognises that the semiotic enterprise itself is a social practice, which has to be applied to specific problems, for (and to) certain ends, and that lends itself to an application to both semiotic concepts and methods, as well as various other fields of study.

In my investigation I am primarily concerned with three fields: the field of cultural production, the field of advertising and the field of vernacular typography. In order to account for the field of cultural production, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), and also make frequent use of *Mary Douglas' Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966). I account for the field of advertising by making use of Guy Cook's *The Discourse of Advertising* (2001) and Robin Landa's *Advertising by Design* (2010). Adrian Hadland's *Power, Politics and Identity in South African Media* (2008) is also crucial for providing a South African perspective to the particular processes of communication that I investigate in this thesis.

The field of vernacular typography proves significantly more challenging to situate within a theoretical framework. The subject of vernacular typography necessitated a literature survey that was quite wide in scope, and I considered a large amount of written material.

For example, I started with a broad survey of western typography, and examined a large body of academic publications. These can be arranged in the followings broad categories: studies into the social history of typography,³ practice-based accounts highlighting mainstream approaches,⁴ academic studies into the institutional education of typography,⁵ academic essays on formal typographic practices,⁶ and historical studies into the development of specific typographic styles.⁷ However, there appears to be an absence of work critically engaging with the relationship between large-scale commercial and vernacular typography. I foreground Steven Heller and Christine Thompson's *Letterforms Bawdy Bad and Beautiful: The Evolution of Hand-drawn, Humorous, Vernacular and Experimental Type* (2000) as one of the few examples⁸ where this relationship is touched upon (albeit quite superficial and uncritical in its approach to the subject matter), and I make brief use of it as a background to my own study. In order to account for the lack of theoretical enquiry into the relationship between mainstream and vernacular typography, I conducted interviews with the following contemporary practitioners: Cassidy Curtis, creator of an internet data-base dedicated to the documentation and collection of a vernacular typography; Shane Durrant, a South African copywriter and collector of South African vernacular letterforms; and Wesley van Eeden, a Durban-based graphic designer with a prominent history of corporate graphic design for clients such as *Orange*, *Avusa*, *Cell C* and *Nike*.

³ See, for example, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism* (2003) and *New Typographic Design* (2007).

⁴ *Getting it Right with Type: The Do's and Don'ts of Typography* (2006) and *Designing with Type: The Essential Guide to Typography* (2006) were some of the most notable sources within this category.

⁵ See, for example, *The Education of a Typographer* (2001) and *Teaching Graphic Design: Course Offerings and Class Projects from the Leading Graduate and Undergraduate Programs* (2003).

⁶ See *Texts on Type* (2001) and *Figuring the Word* (1998).

⁷ See, for example, *Futurist Typography and the Liberated Text* (2006) and *Blackletter: Type and National Identity* (1998).

⁸ Additional examples include, among others, various articles from academically orientated graphic design magazines such as *Émigré* or *Eye*. However, I primarily draw on Heller and Thompson's publication since it provides a coherent outline of a specific conceptualising of 'vernacular typography'.

In addition, I also make use of various visual sources in order to formulate my own understanding of 'township typography' and to illustrate my argument. As this thesis constitutes the theoretical component of my study in illustration, it is important to note that the practical component of my study does not necessarily mirror my theoretical concerns. My practical work rather expands on and experiments with certain aspects that are dealt with in my thesis.

By drawing on the various sources outlined above, I present my analysis of 'township typography' by firstly providing a concise overview of this typographic system as a visual dialect in Chapter 2. In this chapter, I outline a working definition both for the term 'typography' and the phrase 'vernacular typography'. In order to accomplish this, I draw on Thompson and Heller's (2006) formulation of 'vernacular typography'. However, I argue that their formulation of 'vernacular typography' is not sufficient to account for 'township typography', and I foreground my interviews with Cassidy Curtis and Shane Durrant to shed light on the field of 'township typography' as a specific stylistic formation in the broader field of 'folk typography'.

From this chapter, I proceed to conduct a brief examination of the South African field of cultural production in Chapter 3 by foregrounding Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) analysis of modes of cultural production. I draw on his formulation of the fields of restricted- and large-scale production, and the operation of these fields in terms of the 'social quality' that they demonstrate and degree of "consecration that they acquire from various cultural institutions (Bourdieu 1993: 46, 49). In order to elaborate on this specific formulation of cultural 'consecration' I also draw on Mary Douglas' (1966) conception of the functions of the "sacred" and of cultural "dirt" (1966: 95) within modern societies.

It is from this perspective that I proceed to account for 'township typography' as an example of 'dirt' within the field of South African cultural production. According to Douglas, dirt carries "a symbolic load" that can be drawn upon by "specific individuals on specific occasions" (1966: 160). As such, I examine the work of Garth Walker as one example where

‘township typography’ is appropriated into the South African field of restricted cultural production. I argue that Walker serves as an important (and arguably one of the most well-known) example of an integration of ‘township typography’ into South African cultural production.

By reflecting on my formulation of both ‘township typography’ and the field of cultural production, I proceed to a detailed account of the incorporation of ‘township typography’ into South African mainstream cultural production in Chapter 4. In order to account for ‘township typography’ as a specific stylistic formation, I make use of Halliday’s Social Semiotic formulation of ‘social dialects’ – variations in language generated and maintained by distances in the social structure. I employ Halliday’s model of ‘social dialects’ as a means to account for the role certain South African economic and social factors play in shaping ‘township typography’ features that are distinguishable from mainstream South African typography. In doing so, I account for ‘township typographic’ as an amalgam of demographic and technical variabilities. In addition, I specifically focus on Roland Barthes’s (1972) conception of connotation (and by implication his formulation of ‘myth’), as well as Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s (2001) Social Semiotic interpretation of Barthes’ theoretical framework. By reflecting on the above understanding of ‘myth’ I illustrate how certain social, cultural and demographic structures are linked to ‘township typography’ by means of connotation.

In order to explore the significance of ‘township typography’ in South African advertising, I draw on the headlines of two advertising billboards of different financial institutions⁹ - one employing a ‘township typography’ execution and the other one using standardised mainstream letterforms. By drawing on two South African advertising institutions – the *Loerie Awards* and the *Creative Circle* – I examine the role that specific institutions in print advertising play in establishing ‘township typography’ as a meaningful semiotic resource within the South African mainstream visual landscape. I close my thesis by reflecting on additional areas of inquiry that are identified in my study. I conclude by firstly highlighting certain points touched upon in my analysis that (although beyond the scope of my study) I

⁹ These institutions are *Metropolitan* and *Allan Gray*.

deem fertile areas for future investigation, and secondly by considering what South African typographic dialects might encompass in a changing South African landscape.

CHAPTER 2

SOCIAL SEMIOTICS AND 'TOWNSHIP TYPOGRAPHY' AS A VISUAL DIALECT

Of central importance to my study is the concept of 'township typography'. In order to determine and define the features of 'township typography' I firstly define it as part of a larger body of vernacular typography (Section 2.1) and then proceed to investigate the contemporary social and historical factors that gave rise to the specific visual features found in township typography (Section 2.2). For this analysis, I draw on Halliday's Social Semiotic framework as laid out in *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (1978). I specifically make use of his concept of 'language variety' in order to account for broad stylistic formations that are found in 'folk typography', I approach 'township typography' as one example of this language variety in 'folk typography' and investigate the possible role that South African informal settlements play in the emergence of certain stylistic features associated with 'township typography'.

2.1: A Brief Definition of Vernacular Typography

'Typography' emerged in the seventeenth century as a term referring to the activity of preparing or arranging pre-made letters for printing by means of a printing press (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 2006: S.v. 'typography'). Leading up to the present, methods by which letterforms are conceived and produced have undergone fundamental shifts and "have become more accessible" (Willen & Strals 2009: 15). In contemporary society where "the traditional barriers of steel punches, brass matrices and leaden types which separate type production from handwriting and lettering have been superseded by a new technology" (Noordzij 2000: xi) these divisions are no longer clearly defined. Through my research process I have encountered a divergent usage of the term 'typography' in its contemporary application, predominantly in popular graphic design and illustration culture. Well known websites such as *Typography Served* (*Typography Served* [Online]), *Typeforyou* (Serrão & Planche [Online]) and *I Love Typography* (Boardley [Online]) appear to use the

term indiscriminately for all letter-making practices. It is from this perspective that I draw on Kees Broos' definition, as drawn out in *From De Stijl to a New Typography* (2001):

Let us define the word 'typography' here as the deliberate use of letters, in the broadest sense of the word. The user can be printer, typographer, architect, poet, or painter. The materials are not restricted to those of the type case or typesetting machines, but encompass every suitable medium from linoleum to electronic news marquees and from a tile tableau to television (Broos 2001: 100).

In order to specifically define the category of 'vernacular typography' within a broader typographic framework, Steven Heller and Christina Thompson's *Letterforms Bawdy, Bad and Beautiful: The Evolution of Hand-drawn, Humorous, Vernacular and Experimental Type* (2000) is an important source that I draw on for my own analysis. They define vernacular typography as "the limited, though functional, vocabulary of sign painters, printers and other graphic arts journeymen who produce billboards, menus, phone book ads, and other such prosaic artifacts" (Heller & Thompson 2000: 17). In addition, they attribute the incorporation of vernacular features into mainstream typography to "a postmodern aesthetic" that draws on vernacular elements, either as pastiche, parody or "simply for the pleasure of using functionally diverse, discarded objects" (*ibid.*). However, Heller and Thompson primarily deal with a North American conception of 'vernacular typography' and, therefore, primarily draw a distinction based on the division between high and low typographic culture, or between mainstream designers and artisans. They describe 'vernacular typography' as a product of "the mid-1980s" established by a "so-called post-Modern impulse" to incorporate typographic elements from "craftspersons and naïfs" (*ibid.*):

At the time, a distinction was made between bad "tutored" design (the work of mediocre design school graduates) and good "untutored" designs (that of trades and craftspersons). Of course, it is silly to presume that sign painters and printers are untutored, since it requires considerable training to do this kind of work, and to do it well. But to the majority of design school graduates

and members of professional organizations like the American Institute of Graphic Arts or Type Directors Club, sign-shop art is not in the same league as refined, theory-driven Graphic Design (in capital letters). (Heller & Thompson 2000: 17)

Heller and Thompson's conception of 'vernacular typography' is primarily concerned with a broad division within the world of professional typography. In my study, I am primarily concerned with a specific body of vernacular work created by individuals in the absence of any training or previous experience working with letterforms. While Heller and Thompson's analysis is based on an American framework, my own analysis is based on local forms of vernacular typography. As such, my investigation may offer a supplementary (or even conflicting) perspective on vernacular typography if compared to Heller and Thompson's work, given the contingency of local vernacular typographic dialects.

2.2: 'Folk Typography' and Visual Dialects

After conducting a literature survey, I found that there is little academic discourse, particularly in the form of published material, on the field of folk typography – something that can perhaps be ascribed to this field only gaining academic attention in recent years. I therefore turned my attention to an internet data-base¹⁰ dedicated to the documentation and collection of this body of “surprising, original letterforms created by people who are not designers, typographers, calligraphers, or graffiti artists, in other words, people outside of all traditional schools of typographic influence” (Curtis 2005 [Online]). Cassidy Curtis mentions that he coined the phrase 'folk typography' when he started the data-base in 2005, but admits that he soon “found that other people had already used it to mean something pretty similar” (Curtis, Electronic Interview, 3 March 2011 [see Addendum A]). Curtis describes 'folk typography' as follows:

¹⁰ This data-base currently (13 October 2011) consists of 1394 members and is, correspondingly, titled 'Folk Typography'.

I use it to describe innovations in lettering created, often inadvertently, by people who are not in the business of inventing letterforms. Some people will point to any kind of crudely-made lettering and call it folk type. In a sense, they see folk type as the typographical analogy of “outsider art”. I can accept that broad definition, but I’m more interested in the inventiveness of it than the crudeness as such... I also don’t consider it folk type if it’s done by a designer, calligrapher, graffiti artist, or anyone else whose vocation directly involves creating letterforms. (I reject a huge number of photos from my Flickr group because they are clearly the work of professionals.) (Curtis, Electronic Interview, 3 March 2011 [see Addendum A]).

Furthermore, Curtis argues that ‘folk typography’ is a label that he applies to “an emergent result of countless individuals gamely attempting to solve their immediate sign-making problems” (Curtis, Electronic Interview, 3 March 2011 [see Addendum A]). As such, ‘folk typography’ is characterised by stylistic divergence, and it is often difficult to identify any sort of shared visual features from examples of ‘folk typography’. However, due to certain social factors (inter alia), shared stylistic trends do emerge. In areas and times where resources are limited and relatively homogenous, co-configurations of certain visual features do appear. Curtis draws on a Brazilian example of *pixação* lettering¹¹ to explain that:

Materials also play an important role. Brazilian *pixação* graffiti, which began as folk typography and has evolved into a unique indigenous lettering style, got many of its characteristic features because of the material and economic constraints of its earliest practitioners: narrow paint rollers, dipped in tar stolen from construction sites, used to draw letters as tall as possible on the sides of apartment buildings. (Curtis, Electronic Interview, 3 March 2011 [see Addendum A])

¹¹ For a comprehensive account on this lettering style see François Chastanet’s *Pixação: São Paulo Signature* (2007).

In order to account for the formation of these stylistic co-configurations, Michael Halliday's (1978) Social Semiotic framework is of importance. Halliday encourages an approach that transcends the traditional notion of semiotics (as a set of rules) and rather recommends the adoption of a "resource orientated" (Halliday 1978: 192) framework. Halliday argues that individuals, in everyday life, make creative use of and modify resources in order to create meaning. This approach demands an "outside inwards" (Halliday 1978: 4) perspective that interprets instances of communication as shaped by their position in social structures. Halliday's early Social Semiotic framework is predominantly concerned with linguistics. However, core concepts of his early framework later developed, thanks to the Sydney Semiotic Circle,¹² into a comprehensive multimodal framework.

I am primarily concerned with Halliday's Social Semiotic interpretation of Thomas Reid's (1956) concept of language variety as found in *Linguistics, Structuralism, Philology*. Halliday develops Reid's work into a framework that distinguishes between variations in language according to the user (defined by variables such as social background, geography, sex and age), and variations according to use. Halliday's formulation of 'dialects', which refer to variety according to the users of a given language, is particularly relevant in this regard. According to Halliday, the common formulations of dialects are based on the idealised concept of a speech community, that is a group of people that form a social organisation in which they "talk to each other and all speak alike" (Halliday 1978: 154). However, upon examining concrete examples in an urban context, this basic formulation falls apart. Halliday notes that the urban 'speech communities' are heterogeneous units and, in response, he formulates a conception of dialects as "determined by spaces" (Halliday 1978: 155) and not by centralised points of sameness. He argues that dialects are not defined by their adherence to an idealised style, but by their distance from other dialects in their immediate environment. Halliday broadly classifies the spaces that separate dialects in the following manner: idiolects (the space between specific individuals), temporal dialects (the space between time periods), geographic dialects (the space between certain regions), social dialects (the space between social groups), and standard/non-standard dialects (that is the

¹² For a comprehensive overview of the work done by the Sydney semiotic circle see David Chandler's *Semiotics: The Basics* (2001: 219-221)

space between the different degrees of legitimacy). As such, dialects are context specific, and while their existence may be a “fact of everyday experience” (Halliday 1978: 111), certain “fairly general features” (Halliday 1978: 158) are, over time, associated with particular dialects.

It is from Halliday’s formulation of dialects that I account for a specific stylistic formation within ‘folk typography’ – namely ‘township typography’. In the following section I employ Halliday’s formulation of social dialects in order to account for ‘township typography’ as determined by the spaces between social groups. From this perspective I investigate the role that South African social structures play in the formulation of specific stylistic features associated with ‘township typography’ and how these features relate to mainstream typographic standards.

2.2.1: ‘Township Typography’ as a Social Dialect

As I have argued, the visual features associated with ‘township typography’ is not exclusively confined to South African informal settlements, yet, certain stylistic features found in this dialect can be traced to their origins within South African informal settlements. In the following sections, I pay specific attention to the role that South African informal settlements play in the emergence of this stylistic dialect, and I proceed to outline ‘township typography’ by drawing a comparison between the shape of letterforms in ‘township typography’ and letterforms in mainstream typography. In the previous section I briefly touched on the connection between the emergence of stylistic co-configurations in ‘folk typography’ and constraints on resources in a region. In South Africa, these constraints also take on an economic dimensions, given the role that both colonialism and apartheid have played in the economic stratification of South Africans on the basis of their race. These issues are necessarily complex, and they lie beyond the scope of this study; however, I address them briefly in order to formulate ‘township typography’ as a social dialect as it is produced within a South African socio-economic framework.

The extreme levels of poverty present within South African informal settlements are of central concern to my formulation of 'township typography'. An analysis conducted by the University of Cape Town during 2010 highlights a disconcerting rise in poverty and unemployment, specifically among youth in urbanised areas (Leibbrandt, Woolard, Finn & Argent 2010). In addition, the secretary general from the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, Angel Gurría, remarked, during his official 2010 visit to South Africa, that poverty and unemployment are defining features of the current South African socio-economic landscape:

Low employment remains the overriding policy challenge. South Africa has an extreme and persistent low employment problem, which interacts with other economic and social problems such as inadequate education, poor health outcomes and crime. As in other countries, vulnerable groups are most affected by unemployment, and in South Africa the problem is extreme for black youth. (Gurría 2010 [Online])

In *Walker Evans and Gavin Fresh Fruit and Veg: Signs of the Times* (2009), John Edwin Mason, a lecturer in African History and the History of Photography at the University of Virginia, draws a comparison between the signage found in South African informal settlements and those found in poor North American communities during The Great Depression. He notes that South African informal settlements are "bustling with activity" since "unemployment is high and, because the government has been unable to make good on its promise to create millions of jobs, people have to rely on their own enterprise. The result has been an explosion of small businesses" (Mason 2009 [Online]). These businesses, which largely comprise of informal traders that are known as *spaza* traders, are a prominent social feature of South African township life. *Spaza News*, a bi-monthly publication aimed at *spaza* shop owners, estimates that "there are at least 100 000 *spaza* shops in South Africa – with an estimated 40 000 located in Gauteng, with a collective turnover of well over R7 billion per annum" (Spaza News 2010). These "shopkeepers of limited means" (Mason 2009 [Online]) have to create their own signage by drawing on a constrained selection of resources. Mason highlights one such example – see Figure 1 – by drawing on a photograph taken during his visit to South Africa:

Mtsetse Yiweni was the first person that she introduced me to. He runs a photography studio out of a building that used to be a barbershop. Like most township photographers, he's versatile, shooting portraits, parties, weddings, and just about anything else people pay him to do. Unfortunately, the current recession has cut into his photography business significantly. So he's turned part of his studio into a shop that sells soda, chips, and similar things and another part of it into a video game parlor. (Mason 2009: online)



Figure 1.

Mason, J.E. *Untitled* (2009).

Digital Photograph (Mason 2009).

For Mason, this image serves as an example of how business enterprises, typographic features, and the nature of township life converge in the creation of a specific vernacular dialect.

2.2.2: 'Township Typography' in Relation to Mainstream Typography

The typography on the outside of Yiweni's studio exhibits various stylistic features that may differ from those used in mainstream typography. In order to discuss this differentiation, I draw on Halliday's formulation of standardised dialects. Halliday defines a standard dialect as a dialect that has been granted "a distinctive status" (Halliday 1978: 158) by means of consensus amongst its users. As such, this 'distinctive status' makes it "hard to recognize that the standard dialect is at heart 'just a dialect' like any other" (*ibid.*). Within typography, this concept manifests in the form of mainstream typographic standards. Some contemporary graphic design books approach these typographic standards as purportedly static, universal laws. In *Getting it Right with Type: The Do's and Don'ts of Typography* (2006), Victoria Squire, for example, argues that "when one explains... what constitutes good typography, people will start to get a feel for it" and that "they will become aware that there are many areas in which professional graphic designers have a superior knowledge" (Squire 2006: 7). In contrast, I approach mainstream typographic standards by means of Halliday's "outside inwards" (Halliday 1978: 4) framework, therefore, I interpret standardised typographic features as a product of a constantly changing social world. In order to account for typographic standards as a dynamic social construct, I draw on Bruce Willen and Nolen Strals' conception of mainstream typographic standards, as sketched out in *Lettering and Type* (2009) and their tongue-in-cheek *Post-Typographic Manifesto* (2007). According to Willen and Strals:

Two thousand years of reading and writing the roman [sic] alphabet have shaped the standards of legibility and continue to sculpt it today. What was regarded as a clear and beautiful writing style for a twelfth-century Gothic manuscript is to today's reader as difficult to decipher as a tortuous graffiti script. Nineteenth century typographers considered sans serif typefaces crude and hard to read, yet these faces are ubiquitous and widely accepted in the twenty-first century. Familiarity and usage define what readers consider legible (Willen & Strals 2009: 2).

Typographic standards are often pre-occupied with “the basics of typographic arrangement (line length, line spacing, column structure, page layout, etc.)” (Willen & Strals 2009: vi). However, in this thesis I specifically shift my focus to standards concerning the construction of letterforms themselves. The form of contemporary Western letters, as we know them today, became standardised and codified in the fifteenth century. French art critic and historian Maximilien Vox systematically accounted for the evolution of mainstream letterforms by means of his *Vox-AtypI* classification (Thyssens 2005: Online). The *Vox-AtypI* classification, conceived during 1954 and adopted in 1967 by the *Association Typographique Internationale* and the *British Standards Classification of Typefaces*, classifies letterforms on the basis of a number of formal criteria, such as the form of strokes and serifs, degree of stroke modulation and x-height (Dixon 2002: Online). According to Vox’s classification, mainstream western typography developed into three broad strains: classicals, moderns and calligraphics. Within these broad classifications are several smaller sub-categories varying considerably in regard to the forms of strokes and serifs. However, all mainstream letterforms adhere, to some degree, according to Vox, to a standardised stroke modality.

Stroke modality, in strict typographic terms, refers to the relational thickness between the vertical strokes and horizontal strokes of a letterform. The standard stroke modality, as it is known today, is derived from centuries of writing (or chiselling) with broad-nibbed tools. The usage of these tools at a consistent 30 degree angle standardised a modality of thick vertical and thin horizontal strokes (Willen & Strals 2009: 54-55). This principle is purportedly found in all mainstream construction of letters, from “low-contrast sans serifs”, to “broken or ornamental letters” (*ibid.*) and even in the placement of the breaks in stencil letters.

Through thousands of years of reading and repetition, the Western eye has grown accustomed to the pen-drawn form of the alphabet and its slightly sloped or vertical axis. This generally vertical stress of the pen is thereon why letters’ horizontal strokes are thinner than their verticals, even in low-contrast sans serifs. Awareness of the axis and the pen’s emphasis provides a key for understanding the shapes of the roman [sic] alphabet. A letter with no stroke modulation or whose horizontal strokes are thicker than its vertical will look

wrong to the reader. Occasionally, designers use such wrongness to great effect, but more frequently it betrays a poorly constructed character (*ibid.*).

These standards “live on” (*ibid.*) in almost all instances of contemporary letterforms found in the western world. However, I argue that in some instances ‘township typography’ disregards and often inverts these mainstream letterform standards. In order to illustrate this subversion I draw on the photograph of Yiweni’s studio. Since the common formulation of dialect is often idealised insofar as it is used in a generalising manner to identify stylistic commonalities (as explained in Section 2.2), I refrain from imposing this single example as a stylistic marker for my formulation of ‘township typography’. Instead, I draw on Figure 1 strictly in order to illustrate the degree to which standard letterform principles can be subverted in some forms of ‘township typography’.

Halliday accounts for numerous instances of dialects that subvert the established features found within standard dialects. He refers to instances where this subversion is explicitly evident as antilanguage dialects (Halliday 1978: 164). An example of an antilanguage dialect subverting the stroke modality of letterforms can, for example, be seen in traditional hip-hop graffiti lettering. In *Graffiti Art Style: A Classification System and Theoretical Analysis* (2008), Lisa Gottlieb remarks that graffiti “wall pieces tend to have inconsistently shaped letters” (Gottlieb 2008: 177) where “one or more of the main letter strokes within each letter varies in width (i.e., it shifts from thick to thin or from thin to thick)” (Gottlieb 2008: 191). According to Halliday, an antilanguage dialect is an intentional “mode of resistance” that acts as a “conscious alternative” (Halliday 1978: 164) to standardised features.

However, I argue that the subversion of the stroke modality in ‘township typography’ is largely the result of a limited selection of tools and resources. Due to the economic constraints found in informal settlements, signs are usually produced by the tools at hand. One such tool that is used for creating lettering that I have often encountered in these settlements, is the common large-scale nylon or polyester angular brush used in painting buildings or walls. Letterforms produced by hand in traditional typography (as calligraphy)

are often produced by employing pencil-handle brushes, grasped exclusively by the fingers and employed with a combination of wrist and forearm movements. Due to this feature, these tools can be held at a consistent 30-degree angle and therefore adhere to the standardised western stroke modality. However, the above-mentioned large-scale angular brushes require that the entire palm be used to grasp the brush. The size, weight and resistance induced by the brush require that the entire arm and shoulder (and positioning of the body) be applied in order to produce letterforms. Due to this characteristic, the stroke modalities found in letterforms produced by large-scale angular brushes often change from letter to letter (or within the same letter) and are determined by the ways in which an individual needs to move his/her body in order to produce the letters.

In Figure 2, a photo I took in the informal settlement of Kayamandi near Stellenbosch, the letterforms appear to be the work of an individual who had to move his/her body around in order to paint on a (two-dimensional) plane bigger than his/her stationary field of perception (and the reach of his/her arms) without the resources (using a projector to draw outlines) or training (using a grid system) usually employed to overcome these physical challenges inherent in the format (and materials). The resulting variations from the standardised stroke modality are divergent in their manifestation – see for example the difference between ‘SHOP’ and ‘SALON’ in Figure 1. However, due to the nature of these large-scale angular brushes, certain examples of ‘township typography’ display a distinguishable stroke modality.



Figure 2.

Venter, S. *Untitled* (2011).

Digital Photograph.

The unconventional appropriations of everyday painting tools give both these examples a specific visual appearance. It is possible, due to the manner of execution, to provide a category for these letterforms – a category that provides only a broad, temporary means of interpreting these letterforms. I am therefore of the opinion that ‘township typography’ is a complex category as it refers broadly to letterforms created in informal settlements, while it is also underscored by a certain approach to stroke modality that can (in some cases) be identified in its execution, thus making it an amalgam of demographic and technical variabilities. It is from this perspective that I investigate the infiltration of features associated with ‘township typography’ into mainstream South African cultural production. By reflecting on the social environment associated with ‘township typography’ and the co-configuration of stylistic features present in examples of ‘township typography’ executed with a standard large-scale angular brush, I proceed in the next chapter to examine the

structures and processes leading to the incorporation of 'township typography' into mainstream South African cultural production.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOUTH AFRICAN FIELD OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I examined Halliday's Social Semiotic formulation of language variety by focusing on his formulation of dialect and employing it in order to account for a specific body of 'folk typography'. I examined the social factors that shape this dialect and foregrounded specific stylistic configurations that are found in this dialect that are of central importance to my investigation. In this chapter, I focus on the alternate side of Halliday's language variety, namely register. I draw on register in order to account for the structures and processes leading to the incorporation of 'township typography' into mainstream cultural production.

This chapter also provides a basic overview of the institutionalised field of South African cultural production by using Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of cultural production, as well as Mary Douglas' formulation of "dirt" (Douglas 1966: 2). I proceed to examine the incorporation of 'township typography' into mainstream cultural production at the hand of both these theoretical frameworks.

3.1: The Field of Cultural Production

According to Halliday, the term 'register' accounts for the configuration of semiotic features associated with specific situations. However, the significance of register is not that it merely allows for individuals to look back on instances of semiosis in order to account for certain semiotic features, but Halliday rather accredits the significance of register to the fact that it prompts individuals to anticipate specific semiotic features in certain instances of semiosis. Halliday sees register as the combination of three social aspects – "field of discourse", "mode of discourse" and "tenor of discourse" (Halliday 1978: 33). 'Field' refers to the institutional setting in which the specific instance of semiosis occurs; 'mode' refers to the semiotic medium adopted in order to communicate; while 'tenor' refers to the relationship between all individuals implicated in the specific instance of semiosis. The latter can further

be divided into personal or impersonal tenor (a distinction regarding the formality of a relationship) and functional or non-functional tenor (a distinction regarding the instructive nature of the relationship). At this point in my study I am primarily concerned with Halliday's notion of 'field of discourse' – that is, the institutional setting in which the specific instance of semiosis occurs. I proceed to argue that Halliday's formulation of 'field' (making use of John Pearce's definition) as an "institutional setting in which a piece of language occurs" that "embraces... the whole activity of the speaker or participant in a setting", as well as "other participants" (Halliday 1978 : 33) intersects with Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of 'field' in *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgement of Taste* (1987) as coordinated social spaces in the social structure (1987: 132). In addition, Halliday points out that fields consist of "certain systematic norms" (Halliday 1978: 62) governing the particulars of text produced in certain institutional settings. The above phenomenon, briefly observed by Halliday, is examined indepth by Bourdieu within *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) as the relation between 'field' and 'habitus'.

Bourdieu opposed the prevalent sociological traditions of his day, which either foregrounded the "ideologies of artistic and cultural autonomy from external determinants" or totally rejected "a notion of the agent" (1993: 2). In response to these traditional viewpoints, Bourdieu formulated his own framework, predominantly built around his conceptions of 'habitus' and 'field'. Briefly put, 'habitus' refers to the collection of forces orientating individuals, without them necessarily knowing it, into certain roles. Habitus grants certain individuals specific sources of knowledge and training, and it also establishes certain dispositions as requirements for entry into certain social structures. 'Fields' refer to the coordinated social spaces in the social structure. Fields have their own rules and schemes of domination and, in modern societies, fields are often manifested in the form of fields of medicine or fields of business, among others (Bourdieu 1987: 132). My study is predominantly concerned with the field of cultural production and Bourdieu's formulation of this field is therefore of central importance.

3.1.1: Restricted and Large-Scale Cultural Production

According to Bourdieu, the field of cultural production is underscored by grids of social power and this is evident in two opposing sub-fields – the field of large-scale production and the field of restricted production – that have bearing on its constitution. The field of large-scale production is “subject to the ordinary laws prevailing in the field of power” (Bourdieu 1993: 39) and success is measured in this field in terms of economic capital. In contrast, in the field of restricted production “we find an inversion of the fundamental principles of the field of power” (*ibid.*). In the foreword to *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), Randal Johnson, Bourdieu’s translator, accounts for the field of restricted production by means of “classical music, the plastic arts [and] so-called 'serious' literature” (Bourdieu 1993: 15) and for large-scale production by means of “privately owned television, most cinematic productions, radio [and] mass-produced literature (the Harlequin or Mills & Boon romance, for example)” (*ibid.*).

This is a very basic conception of the field of cultural production and the fundamental opposition between large-scale and restricted production is cut through by multiple additional oppositions (for instance between genres, styles or approaches) varying from one time period and geographic location to another. In order to account for the contemporary South African field of cultural production I draw on Bourdieu’s analysis of French cultural production, however, I do so with an awareness that these contexts are divergent, and by no means do I attempt to superimpose the structure of the French field mechanically onto the contemporary South African field. Rather, I employ Bourdieu’s analysis in order to account for the emergence of certain broad structural features within the contemporary South African field, and to draw on established terminology that has academic currency. As such, Bourdieu’s formulation of cultural production provides a necessary, albeit a partial, framework for my own analysis.

3.1.2: Consecration and Social Quality in Cultural Production

Part of Bourdieu's formulation of the nineteenth century French field of cultural production encompasses a secondary dimension running perpendicular to large-scale and restricted production. Bourdieu identifies this as "social quality" (1993: 46), and argues that it is determined by its adherence to the dominant values in the social structure (or rather from the centre of values imposed by the dominant factions in the dominant class). Bourdieu argues that work and groups receive a social quality by means of "consecration" (Bourdieu 1993: 49) from specific institutions within the field of cultural production. In order to elaborate on Bourdieu's concept of consecration I draw on the work of Mary Douglas, specifically her book *Purity and Danger: an analysis of pollution and taboo* (1966).¹³

Douglas, a British anthropologist, approaches cultural consecration from a structuralist point of view, influenced predominantly by her fieldwork in the Congo. In *Purity and Danger: an analysis of pollution and taboo* (1966), Douglas commits considerable attention to the concept of "dirt" (Douglas 1966: 2). She conceptualises it as "the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter" which involves "rejecting inappropriate elements" (Douglas 1966: 37). This rejection of inappropriate elements "is not a negative movement", but the result of "a positive effort to organise the environment" (Douglas 1966: 2). Douglas argues that, since "disorder by implication is unlimited" and "order implies restriction" (Douglas 1966: 95), order requires that a "limited selection" be made "from all possible materials" (*ibid.*). As such, "the universe is divided between things and actions which are subject to restriction and others which are not" (*ibid.*). Douglas remarks that the ancient Hebrew concept of 'holy' is "based on the idea of separation" and that the ancient Greek

¹³ This text is in some regards quite dated in its approach to cultural diversity insofar as it reflects to a certain degree a typically modernist approach to 'primitive cultures' which is, in itself, quite problematic. However, I would argue that Douglas' text is important for highlighting the modes of separation that have pervaded nineteenth- and twentieth century western society, and that played a seminal role in establishing context-specific relations that are still prevalent today. Douglas' formulation of "dirt" (Douglas 1966: 2) has proved to be important insofar as it sparked various subsequent studies into the subject of cultural appropriation. Her work has been drawn on and responded to in various ways – see, for example, Judith Fryer (1984), Susan Bean (1981), and Amy Mullin (1996) for some of these responses.

'sacre' (the root of sacred and consecrated) has a "meaning of restriction" (*ibid.*). In "primitive cultures the sacred is a very general idea" (*ibid.*); however, within modern cultures the idea of sacred applies to various areas of "aesthetics, hygiene or etiquette, which only become grave in so far as it may create social embarrassment" (Douglas 1966: 26). The concept of the sacred is, therefore, relational and can be applied to various aspects of modern life:

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications. (Douglas 1966: 37)

3.1.3: 'Township Typography' as Cultural Dirt

It is from this perspective that I account for 'township typography' as an example of 'dirt' within the contemporary field of South African cultural production. Douglas argues that the classification of purity (and, consequently, impurity) creates a unified experience concerning a certain aspect of reality. In the field of typography, 'township typography' is one example that disrupts the concept of a unified notion of stroke modality. Douglas argues that "any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions. It cannot ignore the anomalies which its scheme produces, except at risk of forfeiting confidence" (1966: 40). Since fields have boundaries and margins and their "own right to control" (Douglas 1966: 115), the field of mainstream typography jettisons 'township typography' to the margins, I would argue, where it is subjected to what Douglas describes as "a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting" until it enters into "the mass of common rubbish" (Douglas 1966: 161). Douglas

remarks that dirt is “a kind of omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems” (Douglas 1966: 37).¹⁴

Concurrently, Douglas argues that “dirt, which is normally destructive, sometimes becomes creative” (Douglas 1966: 160). In the final Chapter of *Purity and Danger* (1966), titled *The System Shattered and Renewed*, Douglas recognises that dirt is not only “destructive to existing patterns” but that it also has “potentiality” (Douglas 1966: 160). She argues that, while “it is unpleasant to poke about in the refuse to try to recover anything” (Douglas 1966: 161),¹⁵ dirt is often reincorporated into the system on specific occasions. In order to account for this, Douglas likened this phenomenon to a garden in which “all the weeds are removed” (*ibid.*: 164). She argues that, due to this, “the soil is impoverished” and that “somehow the gardener must preserve fertility by returning what he has taken out”, like “turning weeds and lawn cuttings into compost” (*ibid.*). Dirt is a threat to existing patterns, but it also “carries a symbolic load” (*ibid.*: 3). There is energy in “margins and unstructured areas” (*ibid.*: 115) and this energy is drawn upon by “specific individuals on specific occasions” (*ibid.*: 160).

3.1.4: A South African Example: Garth Walker

Any account on the incorporation of ‘township typography’ into mainstream/consecrated culture is incomplete without mentioning the work of Garth Walker. Walker, a South African designer and photographer, is known for incorporating vernacular typography, specifically ‘township typography’, into his artistic and design projects. Sean O’Toole argues in *A New*

¹⁴ My application of Douglas’ notion of ‘dirt’ is specifically concerned with this notion that certain ‘rejected elements’ (that is, forms of expression or production that are not necessarily part of mainstream society) are captured in a certain discursive framework – they enter a certain vocabulary of sorts. While I am not trying to argue that ‘township typography’ is necessarily stripped of its identity when it enters this framework (as Douglas argues), I do argue that it is read or interpreted in a certain way once it is accessed by mainstream culture.

¹⁵ This is a statement that, somewhat problematically, bolsters her own position as a supposedly enlightened westerner who ‘takes the trouble’ to scratch around in other people’s/culture’s dirt. In this regard, her argument demonstrates the modernist ambivalence towards the ‘abject’ as a simultaneous source of inspiration and scorn.

Visual Language for South Africa (2001) that Walker tries to reconcile visuals from South African vernacular culture with the language of mainstream graphic design.

Instead of leafing through imported design annuals, Walker seeks inspiration in wayward places: the urban sprawl, cemeteries, bus depots. He is particularly fond of what he calls 'street design' and vernacular signage, the latter showing an odd preponderance for drop shadow lettering. Apartheid's demise has occasioned a restless search for identity and place, and Walker's efforts are among the more sincere in a country coming to terms with the notion of 'Africa' in the name South Africa. (O'Toole 2001 [Online])

The 11th issue of Walker's A3-zine initiative *i-jusi*, titled *National Typographika 1* (2000), features examples of "Zulu beadwork, handcrafted wire crafts, shopfront hoardings in Durban, African funeral parlours (note the word African) and West African barbershop signage" (*ibid.*). The 13th issue of *i-jusi*, *National Typographika 2* (2002), features the "nervous typography" (*ibid.*) of South Africa's former *apartheid* regime. This process of "assimilation" (Bell Roberts Publishing 2009 [Online]) is central to *i-jusi*. Walker's applications of South African letterforms are also found in work outside his self-published art-zine. Figure 3 depicts one of Walker's more well-known public projects, a typographic arrangement constructed on the side of the Constitutional Court complex in Johannesburg. The phrase 'Constitutional Court' is displayed in South Africa's eleven official languages by means of three-dimensional acrylic plastic. In addition, the letterforms are also fabricated in the colours of the South African flag. In *Mandela Mandalas (and Other Garth Walker Artifacts from South Africa)* (2011), Ellen Shapiro mentions that Walker "described wandering around three abandoned apartheid prisons on the site where the court was to be built and photographing all kinds of lettering: crude notice boards, 'whites only' signs, and graffiti etched into the dirt walls of cell blocks where political prisoners had been held" (Shapiro 2011 [Online]).



Figure 3.

Ashwell, M. *Official Languages* (2007).

Digital Photograph (Ashwell 2007).

The fact that Simon Weller interviewed Garth Walker for his book *South African Township Barbershops & Salons* (2011) is a clear indication of Walker's role in the incorporation of 'township typography' (and other vernacular typography) into mainstream South African culture. Walker has also appeared as speaker at the South African Design Indaba seven times to date, and has featured in various international design publications and annuals – an indication of his status as a notable designer within both the local and international arena. Walker "trained as a graphic designer and photographer at Technikon Natal in Durban" and "designs for many of South Africa's best known corporate and consumer brands, in addition to a few select international design projects" (Jamarie [Online]). However, he argues that "like all graphic designers, I'm primarily focused on 'corporate or consumer design'. Design for business – that's what pays the bills. Street design is a personal project" (*ibid.*). Indeed, both examples drawn upon – that is *i-jusi* as a "strictly non-commercial" art-zine "limited to

500 copies" (*ibid.*), as well as the once-off Constitutional Court project, falls within the field of restricted production.

Walker therefore serves as an important example of the incorporation of 'township typography' into mainstream restricted cultural production. However, I am concerned with an area that, to date, has remained largely unexamined – the incorporation of 'township typography' into consecrated or large-scale South African cultural production. It is from this perspective that I narrow my focus to the incorporation of 'township typography' into a specific genre of large-scale production, namely print advertising¹⁶.

3.2: Consecrated South African Print Advertising

Bourdieu accounted for consecration in the field of large-scale production by means of two broad categories – consecrated bourgeois art and consecrated social art. Bourdieu draws on drama as one particular genre that has enjoyed a large degree of consecration within the field of large-scale production. Due to its position in the social structure and large-scale production, drama enjoys both large amounts of "institutional consecration" and "secures big profits" for "very few producers" (Bourdieu 1993: 47). I argue that, within contemporary South African large-scale production, mainstream advertising occupies a similar position. Like Bourdieu's example of drama, advertising secures big profits for few producers and, due to a degree of "institutional consecration" (*ibid.*) it occupies the cultural echelons of mainstream South African cultural production. In *Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa: 'Learning to Belong' through the (Commercial) Media* (2008), Sonja Narunsky-Laden remarks on the extent of consecration enjoyed by both the genres of print and broadcast advertising:

¹⁶ I am aware that a certain confusion might surround the exact scope of 'print advertising'. Within my study I make use of the term 'print advertising', outlined by Shanon Durmaskin in *What is Print Media Advertising?*, as "advertising in a print media arena" (Durmaskin 2011: Online). According to Durmaskin "the two most common forms of print advertising are newspapers and magazines. However, print media advertising also includes outdoor billboards, posters on buses, subways, trains and bathrooms, ads in phone books or directories and direct mail" (*ibid.*).

The salience of consumer culture in South Africa is almost self-evident: we note the overwhelming and virtually unconditional endorsement of market forces among the country's political and corporate institutions and leaders. These discourses of consumption, consumer culture and promotional culture constitute the dominant register of public debate in post-apartheid South Africa today, and precisely because they are so integral to mainstream media (especially print and broadcast media), and their consumer-orientated tenor is obvious, they appear to be constituting the underpinnings of South Africa's new 'civil society' (Narunsky-Laden 2008: 133).

When considering the rise of South African print advertising, it is important to note that the processes constituting local advertising have their origins in developed western countries. The "globalization and the homogenization of markets and political systems" elevated contemporary advertising as "a prominent genre in virtually all contemporary societies" (Cook 2001: 8). Therefore, western, and particularly American, notions of advertising play a crucial role in understanding South African mainstream advertising. In order to account for the South African appropriation of this language, I draw on Guy Cook's *The Discourse of Advertising* (2001).

Cook approaches contemporary advertising as a collection of semiotic processes caught up in fundamental international economic and technological changes. He argues that "virtually any statement about advertising becomes outdated as soon as it is made" (Cook 2001: 222). The features defining contemporary advertising "are surprisingly hard to pin down" (Cook 2001: 9); however, "whatever ads may be (good or bad) they are viewed as something quite separate from paintings, poems, songs, novels and films" (Cook 2001: 208). For the purpose of this thesis, I draw on an understanding of advertising as derived from its Latin root, which is "advertere", meaning to "turn towards" (The Oxford English Dictionary 2006: S.v. 'advertising'). Various instances of semiosis can be recognised within this definition as it acknowledges the role of advertising in the reinforcement or altering of an individual's perception regarding a specific issue, product, organisation or individual. Central to this formulation lies the "conscious intention behind the text, with the aim of benefiting the

originator materially or through some other less tangible gain, such as enhancement of status or image” (Goddard 1998: 101).

It is from this understanding of advertising (and, inter alia, print advertising) that typography developed as a semiotic mode. For almost fifty years following the invention of the European printing press, the practice of typography was exclusively concerned with a “deep rooted tradition” to “provide the reader with access to information succinctly, even imperceptibly” (Fawcett-Tang & Jury 2007: 6). Typography followed a long tradition of “fine scholarship and breathtaking craftsmanship” (*ibid.*) performed by highly regarded individuals such as Nicolas Jenson, Erhardt Ratdolt and Aldus Manutius. However, with the emergence of the industrial revolution and the rise of early consumerist culture, “the idea that print might remain a purveyor purely of ‘fine thought’ was speedily undone” (*ibid.*). Suddenly, a new kind of client, “perhaps a soap manufacturer, shipping merchant or theatre impresario, was requesting that the printer not only present his words cleanly and without error, but also that the printer should present him as trustworthy, successful, wholesome and entertaining” (*ibid.*). However, such requests were something for which the print trade was ill prepared; in short, the printer “had to be able to make type perform a role that was the exact opposite of its traditional mannered discretion” (*ibid.*). The rise of print advertising not only prompted change in the basic formulation of the semiotic potential of typography, but also in the processes and tools by which letterforms were produced.

Demand stimulated technological innovation. The introduction of the combined pantograph and router in 1834 revolutionized type manufacture by allowing different sizes and styles of a font to be generated from a single drawing. Size was suddenly important, encouraging the substitution of metal for wood in the manufacture of types as posters and public notices became the most prevalent and popular form of communication on the streets. This dramatic change in scale was another factor in altering printers’ perceptions. Suddenly type was a more flexible medium, something that could be bought in compressed or expanded form, manufactured bolder or lighter, given outlines and dropshadows. (Fawcett-Tang & Jury 2007: 7)

The next 300 years saw a steady rise in print advertising and “new display types flowed onto the market, hundreds of different varieties of letters that are impossible to describe let alone classify” (*ibid.*). Commercial printers “showed splendid appreciation of the new typographic material and invention in its application, whether for starkly simple public notices, highly complex playbills, or delicate labels for tea, biscuits and tobacco” (*ibid.*). This led to the establishment of an intimate relation between print advertising and expressive typography, and today print advertising still remains the “prime provider of type as image” (Fawcett-Tang & Jury 2007: 71).

The semiotic role of typography in contemporary print advertising is central to my study. By reflecting on the relationship between typography and print advertising, and the South African field of cultural production as an area where features from ‘township typography’ are incorporated into mainstream cultural production, I narrow my study in the following chapter by focusing on specific processes whereby ‘township typography’ is incorporated into the South African field of large-scale cultural production.

CHAPTER 4

THE INCORPORATION OF 'TOWNSHIP TYPOGRAPHY' INTO LARGE-SCALE SOUTH AFRICAN VISUAL LANGUAGE

In this chapter, I account for the relationship between typography and connotation by drawing on Roland Barthes' formulation of mythical signification. I examine Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic interpretation of Barthes' framework (Section 4.1) and specifically draw on their formulation of semiotic multimodality. I apply the concept of multimodality to contemporary print advertising in order to examine the significance of advertising headlines in print advertising. From this perspective I investigate the usage of 'township typography' in South African advertising headlines, and I account for the significance of incorporating a social dialect in mainstream print advertising (Section 4.2). I conclude my study by examining the role that various agencies and organisations play in institutionalising 'township typography' as a meaningful semiotic resource in South African print advertising (Section 4.3).

4.1: Typography and Connotation

Foregrounded in any discussion on typography as a semiotic system lies the concept of connotation. The important relationship between typography and connotation is highlighted by Daniel Chandler in his discussion on connotation in *Semiotics: The Basics* (2001):

Indeed, the generation of connotations from typography alone demonstrates how important the material aspect of written language can be as a signifier in its own right. One study, for instance, has shown how various typefaces were rated by some computer users in the USA in terms of how 'youthful and fun' or how 'business-like' each was perceived as being (Chandler 2001: 141).

The concept of 'connotation' first appeared in John Stuart Mill's book *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive* (1843). Mill argues that words have two kinds of meaning. For example, the word 'white' denotes, first of all, white things, such as snow, paper or foam. However, it also connotes abstract concepts such as virtue (Mill 1843: 27). The most important approach to connotation has been that of Roland Barthes, a key figure in the Paris School of structuralist semiotics (Van Leeuwen 2004: 37). Barthes developed his approach to connotation not solely on linguistic grounds, but specifically by drawing on images. Discussion of Barthes' conception of connotation usually centres around two aspects – his formal distinction between denotation and connotation, drawing on Hjelmslev's conception of expression and content,¹⁷ and his formulation of myth, a framework foregrounding the ideological characteristics associated with connotation. In his book *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes argues that after the signifier and signified coupling, one finds another process of signification – a process by which the sign itself becomes a signifier for a second ideological semiotic order, which Barthes defines as the realm of myth:

In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have just described: the signifier, signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. (Barthes 1972: 114)

4.1.1: A Social Semiotic Approach to Connotation and Myth

According to Barthes, myths are very broad and diffused concepts which condense various features and representations associated with people, places or things into a single sign. The formation of myths is the result of meaning being generated by groups in society who exercise control over language and the media. Barthes argues that myth is "a type of speech" (Barthes 1972: 109) that uses pre-existing cultural material to signify broad cultural

¹⁷ As formulated in *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (1961)

concepts in one action of signification. He refers to this as “language-robbery” (Barthes 1972: 131) and argues that no sign is safe from being used for mythical purposes:

Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance. This substance is not unimportant: pictures, to be sure, are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it. (Barthes 1972: 110)

In *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* (2001), Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen expand on Barthes’ formulation of myths by employing a Social Semiotic framework. Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that mythical signifiers are imported from other temporal, geographic, cultural or social domains in order to signify a complex set of ideas and values associated with the specific domain from which it is drawn (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 73-74). They use the example of a specific airline in which they were “surprised to see that the cabin crew wore obligatory blue jeans with their (strictly identical) uniforms” (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 74). According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, blue jeans are drawn from a domain associated with leisure and private time that exists outside the workplace. Since blue jeans are introduced as an obligatory part of the uniforms, it combines “connotations of leisure” with “connotations of work” and so communicates “the new discourse of ‘flexitime’ work practices which increasingly diminish the boundaries between ‘the time of the boss’ and ‘your own time’” (*ibid.*). The above example is significant because it indicates how the function of myth is stimulated by importing types of garments, colour and fabrics into the domain of the cabin crew uniform which formerly were not part of it.

Kress and Van Leeuwen further argue that the cabin crew are probably not even “aware of what it is they wear” because the “discourses are never explicitly formulated. They are only evoked” (*ibid.*). In *The Discourse of Advertising* (2001), Guy Cook argues that, due to the

subtlety of the process of importing, myth is widely employed in contemporary advertising. He argues that advertising “favours any mode of communication which is simultaneously powerful but indeterminate in this way” (Cook 2001: 51). Connotation is “unprovable on a personal level” and therefore individuals “may consider it as possibly an individual rather than a group interpretation” (*ibid.*). He uses the example of an image depicting “a young woman inserting a chocolate bar into her mouth” and argues that it might connote fellation, but because the meaning cannot be systematically analysed it is believed “that this meaning says more about the observer than it does about the picture” (*ibid.*). As a result “members of this group may thus be unwilling to express it either to each other or to another group” (*ibid.*). On the other hand, Cook argues that there are examples of connotation where “it is not, in this case, an unwillingness to express its effect which keeps people silent, but, rather, an inability to formulate the impression in words” (*ibid.*). Connotation contained in highly abstracted form, such as music, texture or typography rely on “a vague and indeterminate world of associations quite alien to any description with pretensions to scientific rigour” (*ibid.*).

In order to formulate the operations of myth in my own subject matter, I draw on two examples employed by Barthes in his analysis of myth, namely the *Panzani* advertisement that is discussed in *Image, Music, Text* (1977), and a magazine cover depicting a young black soldier in French uniform that is examined in *Mythologies* (1972). In the former, Barthes argues that the name *Panzani* and the colour scheme of the advertisement signify not “Italy” but “Italianicity”, a “specifically ‘French’ knowledge” (1977: 34) of things associated with Italy. In the example of the young black soldier Barthes’ argues that the image signifies a “purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness” (Barthes 1972: 115). From this perspective I assume a certain liberty in labelling the mythical signified in my proceeding examples as ‘South Africanness’. I am aware that issues concerning ‘African’ or ‘South African’ identity are beyond the scope of this study and that my conception of ‘South Africanness’ is largely idiosyncratic and based on a select number of visual examples. However, I argue that this impressionistic approach, as illustrated by Barthes, Kress and Van Leeuwen, is one of the most feasible ways to address the mechanics of connotation in typographic dialects, and more specifically to “describe the indescribable” (*ibid.*).

4.1.2: A South African Example: Wesley van Eeden

In order to elaborate on ‘township typography’ as situated within a framework of myth, I draw on the work of South African graphic designer, Wesley van Eeden. I specifically focus on Figure 4, an illustrated magazine spread found in *One Small Seed* magazine (2011: 60-61). Figure 4 serves as the opening spread for an article (one of three on various South African cities) featuring reflections on various bars, clubs, restaurants, cafés and art galleries within the city of Johannesburg. The introductory page to these articles describes them as “a cultural tour through our favourite metropolises. From the main roads to the back alleys of those creative spaces, we venture through the pop culture terrain to uncover the whos, whats, where and whys that make these cities shine. Welcome to the *real* Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban.” (*my emphasis*, One Small Seed 2011: 51). On the page we find a horizontal division, with the top two thirds occupied by a digital illustration and supplemented at the top by a thin light brown bar (with text inside), while the accompanying article resides in the white, bottom third of the page. The illustration is predominantly filled in with a light brown background, while the foreground is presented in shades of maroon, orange, light blue and purple. Van Eeden mentioned in a personal interview that he intentionally tried to establish a South African feel to the illustration, primarily by his use of typography:

One Small Seed magazine sent an email out to lots of people saying that they are looking for anything on Durban, Cape Town or Pretoria. I mentioned that I’m a designer in Durban and whether they want to ask me any questions. I sent them one of my images, the map of Africa... They really digged it and they asked me whether I would like to do a map for each of the different cities. I wouldn’t say that it was my best work, because of the amount of money they paid me, they couldn’t really expect something super cool. But I wanted to give a *South African vibe*, especially with the typography. (*my emphasis*, Van Eeden, Telephonic Interview, 31 January 2011 [see Addendum C])



Figure 4.

Van Eeden, W. *Joburg: The City with a Heart of Gold* (2011).

Digital Image (Van Eeden 2011).

The most salient feature¹⁸ in this illustration would be the headline, namely the word ‘JOZI’ that is placed almost in the middle of the illustration. It features as the focal point of the illustration and is placed in an irregular maroon-coloured block reminiscent of a mind map with various arrows leading from the block to other associations (words and illustrations) that are linked to the title. The ‘J’ appears to be a freehand drawing emulating a mechanical sans-serif typeface, while the ‘OZI’, has an organic outline consisting of several arched lines. Since Van Eeden mentioned that he intentionally employed typography as a communication device, I inquired into the significance of the contrast between the letterforms. Van Eeden remarked that he started out with the intention of “trying to represent the way that

¹⁸ I use the term ‘salience’ in this context to denote the degree to which elements attract the viewer’s attention (Van Leeuwen 2004: 284).

someone in a lower demographic would tackle the project if given the chance” (Van Eeden, Telephonic Interview, 31 January 2011 [see Addendum C]):

It was something I distinctively decided to do, since it needed to communicate ‘South African’. I tried to merge that African street barbershop typography with the cosmopolitan identity of the city. I don’t know whether you guys have it down there, but up here I constantly see this. These guys that would take a piece of wood and they would just paint the word ‘builder’ and a cellphone number on with a brush... What I find fascinating is that I don’t think you will find something like this anywhere else in the world; they will write, for instance, ‘builder’ but then the last letter of the word jumps to the second line... It’s pretty crazy no one would really think of doing that, especially for a title! (Van Eeden, Telephonic Interview, 31 January 2011 [see Addendum C])

Van Eeden’s approach to this project illustrates how certain social, cultural and demographic structures are linked to typography by means of connotation. By drawing typographic features from lower demographic domains into the field of mainstream large-scale production, a “South African vibe” (*ibid.*) is supposedly signified. This notion of ‘South Africanness’ is cast as “pretty crazy” (*ibid.*), with a blend of violence (as alluded to by the knives) and cosmopolitanism (as depicted in the images of diamonds and dollar signs) underscoring an association of being cutting-edge. These ideas are evoked and hinted at by a combination of images and typography – see for example also the word ‘\$andton’ that plays with a combination of image and type. In this manner, typography is imbued with an association of being cutting-edge and highlighted for an ‘African’ sentiment that it apparently references. This example is important for the purpose of my study as it highlights the potential of typography to import certain ideas (such as demography and nationality), and represent them visually.

There are numerous instances where features from typographic dialects are imported into advertising for mythical purposes. For example, in *Visible Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics* (2003) David Crow draws on the widespread use of graffiti typography in advertising:

The possibility in loading messages with second-order signifiers (danger, subversion, dissent, authenticity, politics) has certainly not been lost on manufacturers and advertisers. The unofficial visual language of graffiti and its associated forms have been used to promote fashion labels, music, cars, clubs, sportswear, foodstuffs, drinks and events. (Crow 2003: 116)

In order to elaborate on the significance of typography in print advertising, I return to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's *Multimodal Discourse* (2001) and specifically draw on their formulation of semiotic multimodality. I apply this notion of multimodality to the contemporary field of print advertising, specifically regarding the usage of 'township typography' in South African print advertising, and I examine the significant role of 'township typography' as a means of articulating certain notions surrounding 'South Africanness'.

4.2: South African Print Advertising Headlines

Before I address the theme of South African Advertising Headlines, I first explore the Foucauldian concept of discourses, as it is central to Kress and Van Leeuwen's formulation of semiotic multimodality and has direct bearing on my discussion of South African Print Advertising Headlines. Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that discourses are socially realised in various ways, from dinner-table conversation to newspaper features (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 4). However, they add that discourses are always realised by means of one or more semiotic modes (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 21). In this section, I am primarily concerned with the realisation of discourse through typography, or rather its manifestation through the semiotic mode of typography, and I find Kress and Van Leeuwen's formulation of

semiotic modes particularly relevant in this regard. Kress and Van Leeuwen define semiotic modes as resources that allow “the realisation of discourse” (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 5) in semiosis. They argue that semiotic modes are significant because they can be conceived of as semiotic systems or “as ‘grammars’ of some kind” (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 22). These different systems for meaning-making, or possible “channels” (Halliday 1978: 189), can manifest either as visual, written, gestural or musical resources, among others.¹⁹

The emergence of multimodality in print advertising (and the broader field of large-scale cultural production) has dramatically accelerated due to fundamental technological shifts. The processes and tools by which semiotic modes are produced have become more accessible and integrated, and modes have “technically become the same at some level of representation” and can “be operated by one multi-skilled person, using one interface, one mode of physical manipulation” (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 2). Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that, due to this feature, individuals are able to ask the following types of questions at every point in the production of a semiotic artefact: “Shall I express this with sound or music?” or “Shall I say this visually or verbally?” (*ibid.*). It is from this perspective that I approach Kress and Van Leeuwen’s framework as primarily concerned with the multimodal, rather than purely technical, aspects of semiotic modes of communication:

We move away from the idea that the different modes in multimodal text have strictly bounded and framed specialist tasks, as in a film where images may provide the action, sync sound a sense of realism, music a layer of emotion, and so on, with the editing process supplying the ‘integration code’, the means for synchronising the element through a common rhythm (Van Leeuwen, 1985). Instead we move towards a view of multimodality in which common semiotic principles operate in and across different modes, and in which it is therefore quite possible for music to encode action, or images to encode emotion. This move comes, on our part, not because we think we had it all wrong before and have suddenly seen the light. It is because we want to

¹⁹ See Chapter 3.2 where I examined the development of typography into a semiotic mode within the field of print advertising.

create a theory of semiotics appropriate to contemporary semiotic practice.

(*ibid.*)

4.2.1: The Print Advertising Headline

Robin Landa (2010) argues that advertising messages are expressed through a combination of verbal and visual elements. The “main verbal message is called the line or headline” (due to “the early days of advertising” where “it usually occupied the top of the page” (Landa 2010: 54)). She argues that the headline is usually situated in configuration with a “main visual message” in order to “communicate and express the advertising message” (*ibid.*). However, there are specific guidelines regarding to the application of this relationship:

In an ad, the most important information is the message communicated by the combination of the line (headline) and visual. However, the viewer’s eyes can go to only one place at a time, so the designer should arrange all the elements within the composition to allow the viewer to move effortlessly from one element to another. Even though it is the cooperative action of the headline and visual that communicates the ad message, the viewer will tend to look at one before the other. Either the visual or the line should be the focal point. (Landa 2010: 130)

In addition, Landa mentions that the headline/image combination is often supplemented by body copy and a sign-off (logo). The features are ideally composed through a “delicate balancing act” (*ibid.*) that considers the scale and arrangement of all elements. The broad guidelines dictating the standardised application of the headline and image (as well as the body copy and sign-off) play a crucial role in the specific physiognomy of work located within print advertising. In *Advertising Design and Typography* (2006), Alex White remarks that this standardised framework in its most basic form is known as the Ayers No.1 structure and that “it shows a picture, a headline, and the lesser elements in their naturally

descending order” (White 2006: 26).²⁰ Due to decades of adhering to the underlying Ayers No.1 framework “ads do not need to identify themselves as ads, for this is done as it were, outside them” and that “once recognized as an ad, the intention to persuade the addressee is assumed” (Cook 2001: 232).

Having accounted for regularities in the way that headlines are integrated into print advertising, I shift my focus to the significance of its material production. In order to do this I draw on Landa’s conception of headline ‘style’. She defines ‘style’ as a “visual look based on the particular characteristics that contribute to the overall appearance” such as “type choice, colour palette, texture, pattern, compositional modes” (Landa 2010: 101). In addition, “a style may be retro, historical, personal, particular to an era, flamboyant, classic, and so on” (*ibid.*). Landa argues that the contemporary marketplace consists of a large portion of products and services that are “physically interchangeable” (*ibid.*). She argues that the main distinction between traditional and contemporary advertising is a reorientation and realisation that contemporary consumers are more likely to be attracted by brand-personality and not by “minute differences among products” (*ibid.*). When there are no particular benefits to distinguish between products and services, advertisers employ a brand-personality approach to differentiate between them. In essence, most contemporary companies are selling ideas, “just barely tethered to physical products or services” (Landa 2010: 101). Landa argues that advertisements relying on a brand-personality approach “project an attitude, an aura, a conception of someone’s style and persona, which can be anything from bohemian to country cowboy” (*ibid.*).

²⁰ White’s elaboration of the Ayers No.1 framework is partially founded in a position that maintains that design is a transparent and universal process that ascribes to certain ‘natural’ laws – an idea that is problematic for its assumption that design can gain unmediated access to content. I have previously touched on my own position on the idea of ‘transparent’ design in Chapter 2.2.2 – a position that differs from White’s conception of design. However, for the purpose of this thesis the idea of ‘unmediated’ design as presented by White (and other designers) present a backdrop against which the use of ‘township typography’ as a deliberate ‘mediated’ design process can be measured.

Reflecting on my discussion in Chapter 4.1, one can draw parallels between Landa's conception of 'style' and 'brand-personality', and certain aspects of Barthes' conception of connotation and, by implication, also its mythical associations. Both 'style' and connotation import pre-existing cultural material in order to signify broad cultural concepts in one action of signification. Therefore, my reference to 'style' or 'brand personality' is not only concerned with its aesthetic manifestation; I argue that meaning, as realised through the execution of headline 'styles', articulates and references certain aspects of social reality. It is from this perspective that I proceed to examine the substantial value of 'township typography' in South African print advertising headlines.

4.2.2: 'Township Typography' and South African Print Headlines

In order to elaborate on the significance of 'township typography' within print advertising headlines, I draw on the outdoor advertisements of two South African financial institutions. The first, Figure 5, is an advertisement by *King James* for *Allan Gray* and the second, Figure 6, is a billboard advertisement done by *Lowe Bull* for *Metropolitan*. Both these campaigns are in line with the corresponding agency's overall 'brand-personality'. In *Allan Gray*'s case, they purportedly "help clients build wealth over the long term" by "providing superior long-term investment performance" (*Allan Gray* [Online]). Meanwhile, *Metropolitan* argues that as a "truly African-based business" they are "creating prosperity for Africa's people" (*Metropolitan* [Online]). The divergence in their approaches are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the physical placement of the billboards. The *Allan Gray* billboard forms part of a campaign that consisted of three outdoor signs erected at the Cape Town International Airport during 2008, while the *Metropolitan* billboard was one of seven billboards erected on the sides of the Ghandi Square bus terminal in Johannesburg during 2007.



Figure 5.

Anonymous, *Untitled* (2008).

Digital Photograph (Coloribus 2008).



Figure 6.

Lowe Bull & Am I Collective. *Metropolitan Life Ghandi Square Branding* (2007).

Digital Image (De Wet 2007).

I draw these billboards into discussion on the grounds that they correspond to the same historical timeframe, regionality (South Africa), register of billboard advertising and they were both commissioned by financial institutions. However, these billboards can be recognised for a profound divergence in the material production of their headlines. The Allan Gray billboard adheres to the standards of billboard advertising headlines, identified in *Advertising: Principles and Practice* (2005) as the use of “simple, clean, uncluttered type that is easy to read at a distance by an audience in motion” (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2005: 186). Wells, Moriarty and Burnett elaborate that “the industry’s legibility research recommends avoiding all-capital letters, fanciful ornamental letters, and scripts of cursive fonts” (*ibid.*). However, the Metropolitan billboard sacrifices these guidelines in favour of an execution corresponding to my formulation of ‘township typography’ (as discussed in Chapter 2.4). I account for this divergence in light of the demographic contingency of both billboards’ target market. According to Caryn Cohen, CEO to *Wideopen Platform*,²¹ the Metropolitan billboard is directed at “bus and taxi commuters and Johannesburg city workers” (Cohen 2007 [Online]). She argues that the billboard needed to illustrate Metropolitan’s position of “creating wealth for Africa’s people” (*ibid.*) for this demographic group. This is significant to my study since both these groups predominantly reside in informal settlements and therefore “the solution was to give the visual a vibrant, African feeling with a simple message that the commuters could personally relate to” (Cohen 2007 [Online]). One method in which this “African feeling” (*ibid.*) is brought about, is by importing features purportedly associated with the material production of ‘township typography’.

However, individuals familiar with the register found in the Metropolitan billboard (namely billboard advertising) are usually aware of the abundance of resources and skills located within the field of mainstream advertising. Consequently, these features are not read as a result of constrained resources but as an intentional decision. Halliday argues that dialects commonly are not perceived as “subject to choice” (Halliday 1978: 34). However, he remarks that, in practice, “this is less and less true, and the phenomenon of ‘dialect switching’; is widespread” (*ibid.*). According to Halliday, some groups “learn two or more dialects, either in succession, dropping the first when they learn the second, or in

²¹ The organisation that owns the billboards at the bus terminal.

coordination, switching them according to the context of situation" (*ibid.*). Therefore "dialects come be an aspect of register" (*ibid.*), or rather a "semiotic feature typically associated with specific situations" (Halliday 1978: 111). Halliday argues that "the standard dialect" is drawn upon in formal contexts and "neighbourhood" dialects in informal contexts (Halliday 1978: 34). However, when these conventions are subverted "the choice of dialect becomes meaningful" (*ibid.*):

A speaker may use high variants in formal contexts and low variants in informal contexts: let us call this the congruent pattern. But he may also use the forms incongruently: that is, outside the contexts which define them as the norm. In so doing, he achieves a foregrounding effect, an effect that may be humorous, or startling, or derisory or many other things according to the environment. The significant fact is that such variation is meaningful. (Halliday 1978: 156)

Halliday argues that "in a more pervasive fashion, the social structure is present in the forms of semiotic interaction and becomes apparent through incongruities and disturbances in the semantic system" (Halliday 1978: 114). For Halliday, "being 'appropriate to the situation' is not some optional extra in language; it is an essential element in the ability to mean" (*ibid.*: 34). There is a sense in which the whole semiotic landscape "is value-charged" (*ibid.*:156) and the distances that separate dialects (whether temporal, regional, cultural or social) become integrated into the message. Halliday argues that "this is obviously the background to social dialects, which are both a direct manifestation of social hierarchy and also a symbolic expression of it" (*ibid.*: 113). In the case of the Metropolitan advert, it can be argued that this institution tries to communicate that, as a "truly African-based business" (*Metropolitan* [Online]), they are willing to cross that social distance in order to "create prosperity" (*ibid.*) for individuals often marginalised by financial institutions. This example is significant because it shows one method in which 'township typography' features are drawn upon as means of articulating the advertiser's message.

As I have mentioned previously, the incongruent usage of social dialects is interpreted differently in every situation and therefore, in light of my Social Semiotic framework, I approach 'township typography' not as an predetermined sign but rather a signifier that is "drawn into a specific practice of sign-making" (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 59). According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, the concept of 'semiotic potential' is relevant when describing the usage of social dialects insofar as this term refers to a combination of the "materiality of signifier" (*ibid.*) as understood by similar concrete experiences (which could be the inconsistency of stroke modality in 'township typography', I would argue), as well as the social and cultural history of the development of the signifier (such as the origins of 'township typography' in informal settlements). However, the semiotic potential of resources differ according to specific contexts in which they are used, and the various social, cultural and demographic structures that inform the creation of particular messages.

In both the Metropolitan billboard and Wesley van Eeden's editorial illustration 'township typography' serve as one possible method of expressing 'South Africanness'. However, a different choice might have been made altogether - 'South Africanness' could have been expressed by invoking the colours of South African flag, as in Garth Walker's Constitutional Court typography, for example. However, this might have foregrounded a different idea surrounding 'South Africanness' (such as a more patriotic and/or nationalistic dimension) that was not suited to Van Eeden, *Lowe Bull* or *Am I Collective's* interpretation of the concept. Instead, they drew on a specific vernacular formulation of 'Africaness' as a simultaneously cosmopolitan, cutting-edge and 'everyday' (that is informal or colloquial) concept as it is manifested in South Africa. In the following section, I extend this discussion by considering the role that mainstream South African cultural agencies play in the institutionalisation of 'township typography' within the South African mainstream visual landscape.

4.3: The Institutionalisation of 'Township Typography' as a Semiotic Resource

Central to Kress and Van Leeuwen's multimodal development of discourses lies the notion that discourses are able to be realised in various manners (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 5). In other words, a "discourse is relatively independent of genre, of mode and (somewhat less) of design" (*ibid.*). However, "discourses can only be realised in semiotic modes which have developed the means for realising them" (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 5). In this section, I explore the means by which the mode of typography can realise a specific discourse regarding 'South Africanness', and I examine the process by which 'township typography', as a semiotic resource, is institutionalised in the field of South African advertising.

Van Leeuwen argues that "as society changes, new semiotic resources and new ways of using existing semiotic resources may be needed" (Van Leeuwen 2004: 26). However, since "experimentation entering the field of large-scale production always does so against a possible breakdown of communication" (Bourdieu 1993: 129), these resources need to be introduced systematically by social institutions. In order to account for a broader institutionalisation of "new ways of using existing semiotic resources" (*ibid.*), particularly within the context of post-apartheid, democratic South Africa, I employ Bourdieu's formulation of large-scale cultural production to investigate the latter's usage within South African advertising. According to this formulation, I draw on print advertising as a genre that enjoys large amounts of "institutional consecration" and "secures big profits" for "very few producers" (Bourdieu 1993: 47) due to the "overwhelming and virtually unconditional endorsement of market forces among the country's political and corporate institutions and leaders" (Narunsky-Laden 2008: 133).

According to Bourdieu, consecration within cultural production is diffused by a range of agencies (Bourdieu 1993: 112), ranging from institutionalised to uninstitutionalised

authorities (Bourdieu 1993: 121-122). These agencies are ranked among each other according to their scope and the type of their authority (Bourdieu 1993: 112). Within the field of South African print advertising few institutions enjoy the level of authority wielded by the *Loerie Awards*. The *Loerie Awards* are officially endorsed, among others, by the following organisations: the Association for Communication and Advertising, the South African Creative Circle, the Commercial Producers Association, the Brand Design Council of South Africa and the Public Relations Institute of South Africa (*The Loerie Awards* [Online]). The *Loerie Awards* also receives direct authority accredited by South African governing authorities. According to the *Loerie Awards* website, the city of Cape Town, along with *Gearhouse SA*, act as the head sponsors for the *Loerie Awards* (*ibid.*). This is evident from the fact that Patricia de Lille, the city mayor at the time, formally opened the ceremony this year. In addition, the official *Cape Town Tourism* website endorses the *Loerie Awards* as “the country’s biggest gathering of creative thinkers and brand communication experts” (Cape Town Tourism [Online]).

The *Loerie Awards* encompass various genres in the broader field of large-scale production, such as television, radio, print, non-broadcast video, live events, and digital media, and apart from the award ceremony (spanning over an entire weekend at the Cape Town Convention Centre), the *Loerie Awards* include several other ventures (*The Loerie Awards* [Online]). These are, among others, the *Traveling Exhibition*, *Migrate* magazine, DVDs, seminars and a hard-cover printed annual which serves as “the ultimate historic stamps of who’s who of the years [sic] leading brands and agencies” (*ibid.*). The annual includes the *Loerie Awards*’ official ranking tables, which showcase the top 10 brands, agencies, production companies and individuals (as well as a breakdown by category and size) (*ibid.*). According to the awards, “the aim of the ranking is to offer a transparent report on the outcome of the awards and to avoid different and sometimes confusing claims” (*ibid.*). From this it can be ascertained that the *Loerie Awards* enjoy and bestow a large degree of privilege and authority within the South African field of design and advertising. These features of the *Loerie Awards* are also important as the *Metropolitan* billboard received a Bronze *Loerie Award* in the Corporate Category at the annual *Loerie Awards* in 2007.

In addition, a print-based advertisement executed by *TBWA South Africa* for the international sport apparel brand Adidas – see Figure 7 – also illustrates the process of consecration as it pertains to the field of South African advertising. This is an image from the ‘Kopanya’²² campaign, which was launched two years ago in light of the eighth Confederations Cup, held in South Africa. The print advertisement forms part of a larger campaign, featuring billboards and event guide booklets, and consists of hand-painted representations of well-known soccer players (Milne 2009 [Online]). Like the Metropolitan billboard, the Kopanya print advertisement references a particular form of material production in the headline as reference to ‘township typography’ and, subsequently, a certain notion and aspect of ‘South Africanness’. This example is significant to my study because it also received formal consecration in the form of the South African *Creative Circle’s* Advertisement of the Month award in May 2009,²³ and it was also shortlisted for numerous international awards, such as the prestigious *Cannes Lions Awards*. By examining these examples, I wish to draw attention to what Van Leeuwen phrases as “new ways of using existing semiotic resources” (Van Leeuwen 2004: 26).

²² The word ‘kopanya’ is derived from Sesotho, meaning to ‘join together’.

²³ The Ad of the Month award is chaired by a *Creative Circle* executive committee member and nine other creatives “who have a good awards track record” (*Creative Circle* [Online]).

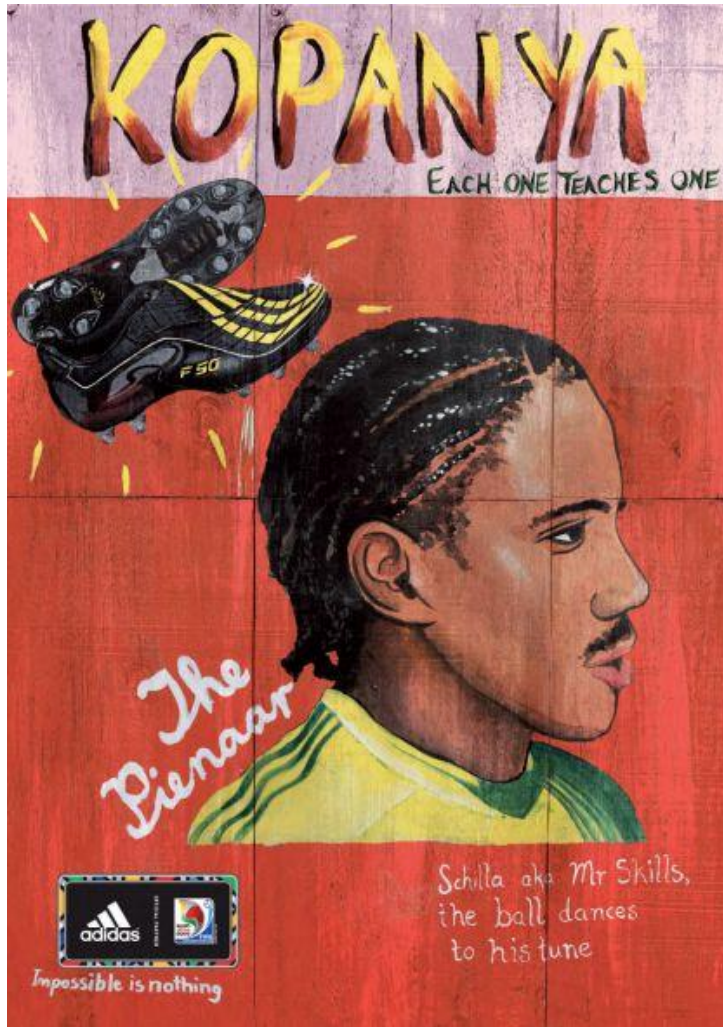


Figure 7.

TBWA South Africa, Adidas Kopanya Campaign for TBWA (2009).

Digital Image (Milne 2009).

I would argue that, in the case of the Metropolitan billboard and the Adidas Kopanya campaign, the *Loerie Awards* and *Creative Circle* take on the role of what Bourdieu identifies as an institutional power of establishing new “doctrines” (1993: 122). One way in which new doctrines in the field of large-scale production are established, is by what Van Leeuwen calls “the rule of the role model” (Van Leeuwen 2004: 56). This is a form of social control exercised by taking ‘ordinary’ work and presenting it as “examples of best practice” (*ibid.*). Van Leeuwen argues that this is in no sense an explicit form of control, but “not taking up clues of this kind can be a social handicap and make us appear old-fashioned” and “out of touch” (Van Leeuwen 2004: 56). However, Bourdieu argues that the field of cultural

production is not only constituted of individuals producing the work, but also of the agencies providing the tools by which the meaning of the work is produced (Bourdieu 1993: 37). The significance of the operation of “new doctrines” (*ibid.*: 122) to my investigation is not that they only serve to popularise a specific style or approach (such as ‘township typography’), but that they also institutionalise the very tools by which an audience draws the link between ‘township typography’ and associations of, *inter alia*, trendy and/or colloquial ‘Africanness’.

By means of the sanctioning power of the *Loerie Awards* and the *Creative Circle*, ‘township typography’ is systematically institutionalised as a method of invoking a specific discourse of ‘South Africanness’ in print advertising. However, since the contemporary language of advertising is developing not just to sell products and services, but “also to model the identities and values of consumer society”, semiotic resources formerly confined to advertising appear to be “rapidly spreading beyond the confines of actual advertisements and infiltrating other genres” (Van Leeuwen 2004: 149-150). In the South African context this is evident in the emergence of ‘township typography’ in editorial illustrations such as *One Small Seed Magazine*. Partly due to the processes of institutionalisation as outlined above, the usage of ‘township typography’ has developed into an elaborate and meaningful semiotic resource drawn upon by South African print advertising, while a decade or two ago the same typographic execution in large-scale production might arguably have been read as the work of an incompetent graphic designer or typographer.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

As this study has shown, ‘township typography’ plays a significant role in mainstream South African cultural production – a role that is underscored by a complex process of incorporation and institutional consecration. This thesis also reflects on areas of inquiry that may provide fertile ground for further examination. Given the restricted scope of the thesis, I touched on the significance of ‘township typography’ in mainstream visual language, yet there is ample room left for either in-depth documentation and interpretation of the social history of South African ‘township typography’, or investigation of the question as to whether there are other international examples of incorporation of ‘folk typography’ into mainstream visual culture. Perhaps most importantly, my concluding exploration into the consecration of ‘township typography’ – as a semiotic resource invoking a particular discourse regarding ‘South Africanness’ in print advertising – opened up a new and diverse field of problems and questions:

First and foremost, letterforms and their connotations, as “symbols that exist at the nexus of art, commerce and ideas”, have a rich history of being employed as ideological tools by “institutions and authorities from the Catholic Church to the Bauhaus” (Willen & Strals 2009: 6). The role that the reappropriation of ‘township typography’ plays in “constituting the underpinnings of South Africa’s new ‘civil society’” (Narunsky-Laden 2008: 133) provides a fertile area for further examination. Secondly, and certainly of greater personal concern, lies the untouched issue of ‘township typography’ as “a dying art form” (Durrant, Electronic Interview, 8 May 2011). As the “knowledge and tools for conceiving lettering and type” become “more accessible, spreading to a more diverse section of the population” (Willen & Strals 2009: 15), the material and conceptual constraints that formerly served as a crucible for ‘township typography’ appear to be dissolving, or at the very least losing their significance. Currently, South Africa enjoys “increased access to and decreased price of digital vinyl printing”, which might serve to wipe this “brilliant testament to human creativity” (Durrant, Electronic Interview, 8 May 2011) from the South African semiotic landscape.

As I have argued in this thesis, ‘township typography’ is increasingly used to articulate notions of cosmopolitan ‘South Africanness’ – as such, this vernacular dialect and its specific material dimensions and socio-demographic contingencies can, through its mainstream application, become an abstracted semiotic resource whose “origins are lost in history and long forgotten” (Van Leeuwen 2004: 104).²⁴ On the other hand, much like the psychedelic appropriation of “ornamental type styles as a symbol of the counterculture” or the typeface *Bodoni* “considered revolutionary and difficult to read when first introduced” but used today “to imply elegance and traditionalism” (Willen & Strals 2009: 5), the semiotic potential of ‘township typography’ might yet be drawn upon in various surprising and unforeseen ways. As such, the development and divergent appropriation(s) of this dialect provides insight into the very nature of typography which is not in itself a static or timeless system, but prone to change.

Even if (as Durrant predicts) ‘township typography’ dissolves from the semiotic landscape, a new set of unconventional tools and skills might give birth to other related social dialects. ‘Township typography’ is also, as I have demonstrated, a complex dialect that is informed by divergent variables, all of which accentuate the fact that this dialect cannot be treated as a singular, fixed category. With the increased accessibility to free desktop publishing software²⁵ (as well as the ubiquity of pirated software) and the current rise of a “growing township ICT market” (*Get News* 2011 [Online]),²⁶ Durrant could be right in his proclamation that the future might “simply usher in a new era of digital township design” (Durrant, Electronic Interview, 8 May 2011). Whatever the case may be, South Africa’s composite socio-economic, cultural and advertising landscape provides rich ground for vernacular typographic dialects to develop, to be appropriated and to speak to a changing South African population.

²⁴ Van Leeuwen explains this process in *Introducing Social Semiotics* (2004) by drawing on “the small slit in the back of jackets”, previously applied “to make it easier to mount a horse” (*ibid.*). However, this feature still “persists in the design of jackets” even though “most people are no longer aware of this” (*ibid.*).

²⁵ The recent versions of *Gimp* (*Gimp* [Online]) and *Scribus* (*Scribus* [Online]), both released this year, deserve notable mention.

²⁶ ITC is an abbreviation for ‘Information Technology Centre’.

**ADDENDUM A: ELECTRONIC INTERVIEW WITH CASSIDY CURTIS
CONDUCTED ON THURSDAY 3 MARCH 2011**

Researcher: Schalk Venter

Respondent: Cassidy Curtis

Schalk: Let me start with a relatively vague, but probably significantly relevant question. Can you perhaps give me a personal definition of the term ‘folk typography’?

Cassidy: The broadest definition of folk type, what most people mean by it, is just any kind of hand-made lettering. My personal definition is a bit more specific. I use it to describe innovations in lettering created, often inadvertently, by people who are not in the business of inventing letterforms. Some people will point to any kind of crudely-made lettering and call it folk type. In a sense, they see folk type as the typographical analogue of “outsider art”. I can accept that broad definition, but I’m more interested in the inventiveness of it than the crudeness as such. (Also, some of the best examples of folk type are not at all crude, but nonetheless surprising!) I also don’t consider it folk type if it’s done by a designer, calligrapher, graffiti artist, or anyone else whose vocation directly involves creating letterforms. (I reject a huge number of photos from my Flickr group because they are clearly the work of professionals.)

Schalk: The first time I came across the term ‘folk typography’ was on your internet database. What are the origins of this term?

Cassidy: I came up with the phrase “folk typography” independently around when I started the Flickr group in 2005. But soon after that, of course, I googled it and found that other people had already used it to mean something pretty similar. So I can’t claim to have coined it, just maybe helped to popularize it a little bit, and add my own spin to it.

Schalk: Why, on a personal level, do you document and encourage the documentation of 'folk typography' on your internet data-base?

Cassidy: I'm interested in evolution as a creative force in the world, especially the evolution of abstract symbolic systems like spoken and written languages. And evolution can't happen without mutation. The early days of written language were filled with mutations, because all writing was done by hand. Since the invention of printing, the rate of mutation has slowed dramatically. Most 21st-century printed letters are no different, structurally speaking, from 18th-century ones. So I have to look to the margins to find places where mutation, and therefore evolution, can happen in my lifetime.

Schalk: How would you define the properties of folk typography as a body of typographic work and what do you think makes it so appealing to individuals from outside these practices?

Cassidy: The core property shared by all folk type is that it is, in one way or another, surprising. I think what makes it so interesting to me is that its evidence of human ingenuity in a very raw, immediate form. It reminds me that ordinary, garden-variety human beings are actually incredibly sophisticated thinking machines that will invent remarkable solutions to problems.

Schalk: Is it possible that the rise of 'DIY' sentiment in western culture, especially within the field of typography, such as the work of Ed Fella, play a role in the rise of 'folk typography'.

Cassidy: That's a very interesting question! I never thought of connecting western DIY sentiment with folk type, but I can see how you might put those things together. There's certainly a connection between people's interests in those two things, in the sense that they both share the appeal of the handmade. But the subjects themselves I think are pretty

different at a deeper level. Most folk type, having been made by hand, is inherently DIY, but the reverse is not true. A professional digital typographer who tries drawing crude letterforms with a stick in the wrong hand may be DIY, but is definitely not folk type. The typographer's own knowledge base excludes him from that category. Another difference is that DIY is all about the subjective experience of making something, and the benefits to oneself and one's community, whereas folk type is a label I apply objectively, from the outside. And a third difference is cultural: DIY as a movement (exemplified by Make magazine, Maker Faire, etc.) is a phenomenon of people from highly industrialized societies trying to regain some of the benefits of a pre-industrial way of living. It's an explicit rejection of industrial society's priorities. Folk type isn't a movement at all; it's an emergent result of countless individuals gamely attempting to solve their immediate sign-making problems. Folk type neither accepts nor rejects industrialism, it just is.

Schalk: Have you ever seen examples of 'folk typography' imitated within mainstream visual culture?

Cassidy: I'm sure I have seen it imitated, but I haven't paid much attention to the imitations. Once professional designers start imitating folk letterforms, it stops being folk type and becomes just another style of professional typography. So I tend not to notice it very much.

Schalk: Do you think there are ways of accounting for broad of stylistic formations in the field of 'folk typography'.

Cassidy: There are definitely stylistic trends. There are regional differences, but I think they are not necessarily cultural differences so much as differences in the availability of materials, and/or linguistic heritage. Linguistic heritage must play a big role. Roman letters created by native writers of Chinese have very particular characteristics, regardless of where in the world they may live, because of how they learned to construct Chinese characters as children. American farmers who hand-paint signs to sell fruit, on the other hand, grew up reading and writing English in school, so their innovations come from the need to

spontaneously adapt a pen-based handwriting to large-format brush-painted signage. Some of the most interesting folk type comes from people who gained literacy only late in life: there is more uniqueness in each letter, maybe because there's been less time for habits to become normalized. (I'm speculating of course. I'd love to see someone conduct a thorough study to tease apart all the different causes and effects!) Materials also play an important role. Brazilian pixação graffiti, which began as folk typography and has evolved into a unique indigenous lettering style, got many of its characteristic features because of the material and economic constraints of its earliest practitioners: narrow paint rollers, dipped in tar stolen from construction sites, used to draw letters as tall as possible on the sides of apartment buildings. (See François Chastanet's wonderful *Pixação: São Paulo Signature* for a definitive history of this writing style!) Some of my favourite examples of folk type happen when an otherwise competent person is forced to work in an unfamiliar or entirely unsuitable medium such as masking tape, cut-out paper or sticks of wood. Even digital typography, in the hands of a complete neophyte, can take on a hand-made quality and produce unwitting innovations in form or structure.

**ADDENDUM B: ELECTRONIC INTERVIEW WITH SHANE DURRANT
CONDUCTED ON SUNDAY 8 MAY 2011**

Researcher: Schalk Venter

Respondent: Shane Durrant

Schalk: Why do you document 'township typography'?

Shane: What I love about design, as opposed to say modern art or illustration is that it solves a problem aesthetically. It's not just something pretty for the sake of something pretty. It stems from necessity. What I love about 'township typography' is just that, it is solving a problem, it is necessary. And it proves that when it comes down to the wire, when a barber shop needs to attract customers, anyone can be a designer. Anyone can be driven to a point where they must force themselves to be creative. There are various factors that attracted me to the genre initially. I obviously love the quirkiness of it, the spelling (often hair salons are marked as 'saloons'), the lack of foresight (someone may draw a great big 'SAL' and squeeze the 'OON' into the remaining space), I love the use of colour (mostly derived from what is available, for example it's not uncommon to see three or four shops in a row with the same colour scheme). It also feels as though it's a dying art form. With the increased access to and decreased price of digital vinyl printing and the like, I believe we will stop seeing so much of this brilliant testament to human creativity. Although one may argue that this will simply usher in a new era of digital township design!

Schalk: Do you think that there is an increasing appropriation of 'township typography' in South African mainstream visual culture?

Shane: I do believe that advertising and marketing companies over the last ten to fifteen years have recognised the value in utilising local symbols and styles. Township Type in

mainstream communication shows that a company is 'down', that it knows what is happening on the street.

Schalk: Concerning the visual representation of South African informal settlements, do you think a contrast can be drawn between the usage of 'township typography' in mainstream visual culture and for instance the stencil lettering used in film *District 9*?

Shane: That's a nice point to bring up. All typography has amazing connotations and allusions, that is why it exists. Hand crafted type shows that real people, with hands and eyes and ideas are involved, stencilled type or cold, clinical Helvetica feels mass produced and computer-generated.

Schalk: Do you think the recent 2010 World Cup played a role in an increased application of 'township typography' in South African mainstream visual culture.

Shane: Everything vaguely South African was huge during the World Cup. There probably hasn't been such a surge in South African culture/pride since Mandela was elected.

Schalk: I first came across the term 'township typography' on your personal website. What are the origins of the term?

Shane: I actually just came up with the term for my blog. It's not entirely accurate as most of the images don't come from businesses in actual townships. Most of the photos come from city centres and CBDs. It had a nice ring to it and conveyed the right sentiment.

Schalk: As a designer and typographer yourself, how do you account for the usage of typography in the field of advertising and design?

Shane: In design, typography is communication. It exists to communicate. It should be able to stand alone. It is the typographer's job to choose a typeface that communicates the message/tone/feeling as immediately as possible, not to choose a typeface that requires an entire backstory before it makes sense. The reason folk type works in South African advertising is because we are familiar with the genre of signage it is referencing. If someone tells a joke about world religious leaders walking into a bar to someone that has no understanding of religion or bar culture, the joke is completely lost on them. Not to say it's a bad joke, it's just that the person hearing the joke would not 'get' it. Similarly, typography that references widely accepted social phenomena will hit home with a wider audience. In my opinion, this is up to the typographer – it is his/her prerogative as to how accessible the work will be.

**ADDENDUM C: TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW WITH WESLEY VAN EEDEN
CONDUCTED ON MONDAY 31 JANUARY 2011**

Researcher: Schalk Venter

Respondent: Wesley van Eeden

Schalk: I should probably start with the hardest, most vague question. I apologize in advance. What do you mean when you call something good typography? I know it is quite hard to articulate an answer for something like this, but just give me what you have.

Wesley: Before I answer that, it obviously depends on the context. For instance, would you be talking about an illustration commercial project?

Schalk: Yes, the type of typography that you usually do in your illustration work.

Wesley: There are probably two things that form the basis of what I call good typography. First, is the context. If I was given a brief, I would firstly have to interpret the concept. So the concept is important. How original the idea is in regards to the concept of the brief. Secondly, the crafting of it. Whether the crafting suits the concept and whether it is done well. If you are going to do it in a traditional sign writing technique, does it look like real sign writing or does it look like you used a cheesy font that just tries to mimic that effect.

Schalk: So you would say technical capabilities play a role?

Wesley: Yes. If it has been crafted really well, you can see it. To use an example: if you are asked to do calligraphy for a project. Whether it looks like real calligraphy is an issue, because it's such a specialized technique. So it's important for me whether it looks like the real deal, or just a cheap rip-off. Just coming back to the concept. If it is supposed to

represent a certain look or feel, it obviously needs to be accurate in its representation. You should be able to see what it is saying. If it has to represent something very specific like a specific culture, person or feeling; I should be able to see that it does so faithfully. Just by looking at it, I should be able to pick up these different things.

Schalk: Thus taking control of the meaning, and not leaving anything to chance?

Wesley: Yeah

Schalk: To move the conversation forward a bit; I think last time we spoke you told me that you studied at Durban University of Technology?

Wesley: Yes, D.U.T.

Schalk: I think you mentioned that you felt the course was a bit out-dated?

Wesley: Very out-dated!

Schalk: Why did you feel that it was out-dated? Is there anything in particular, any concrete examples that you can think of?

Wesley: I think firstly, we should have learned a couple more programs. For instance, we didn't learn *Adobe Flash*, not that it is really graphic design 'per se', but I think I would have been relevant. I even remember reading *Computer Arts* magazine and even back then the designers would be learning flash when they were studying. *Adobe Illustrator* is another example, which was the international program for vector work. I think about 90% of the world used *Adobe Illustrator*. I think India, South Africa and something like Indonesia were the only countries still predominantly using *Macromedia Freehand*. The lecturers would also

say that the course was up to international standard. They would explain all the stuff, but they wouldn't really train you for international standards. That is one aspect that I felt was really out-dated. Secondly, a lot of the lecturers were really old. It would have been nicer to get younger lecturers, people that are actually in the industry, and are actually currently relevant (when I was studying). However, the teachers that are there now are the same one when I was there, which was about 12 years ago. Do they really know what is going on now? I don't think so. We definitely learned a lot regarding the fundamentals of design, like learning how to draw and understanding basic design theory. I just think they could have had a component or subject, where you learn about new developments in the industry, even if it is just a brief overview. Even if it is just a starting point for students to pursue in their spare time.

Schalk: I see. To close in on this, did you receive any dedicated typography training?

Wesley: We definitely learned about typography and what makes typography work in a design context. Thing such as layout, point size, leading and kerning. But I do think it could have been pushed further. However that being said, I think it is really hard to dig deep into anything specific when you're doing a 3 year course.

Schalk: Yes. Judging from a bit of broader reading I've done on the subject, It seems that it's becoming more apparent that this is a problem with graphic design education in general, you know? The length of a general design course in regards to the sheer mass of information out there that a 'successful' designer needs to understand and wrestle with.

Wesley: That being said, I do think, even for BTec or Masters, we should watch out for spending too much time on theory and not enough on practice.

Schalk: Yes, that's a whole different problem in its own right.

Wesley: I think, it's probably happening already, but education is going to change, and it's going to be pretty drastic, and it's going to be pretty soon. Especially now that the internet has become such a prominent factor in our everyday life. For example, my brother studied mechanical engineering, but now he's a web designer. He taught himself, and he's a web designer for *Mr. Price*. However, he has no qualifications, but he ends up having quite a high end job in an industry that has nothing to do with his original field of study. And you can't really go and study to do what he is doing, it's usually all just self-taught. Taking this into consideration, what you learn at an educational facility is always going to be – out-dated would be the wrong word – but always one step behind what's going on out there. Because to implement those new structures and subjects take time, and everything is changing so quickly. I just think maybe it would be cool to have one experimental subject where the lecturer pursues quite eclectic things. Obviously things that relate to what is currently going on in the design world. Thus you can still keep the curriculum the same every year. You know? That might be a possible solution. But you can basically learn anything now with the internet, honestly, the only reason I went to go study was to get a piece of paper. I think sooner or later people and educational institutions are going to realize this. I think that we are going to reach a point where education institutions are going to have to change their education model in correspondence with how our ways of learning are changing.

Schalk: Yes. I initially started my research with the idea that there is a serious discrepancy between graphic design education and what is happening within graphic design as social practice. I think it has reached a point where my generation is the first to experience this first hand – judging by the fact that a large majority of my peers (and the people whom studied with my ex-girlfriend, and my ex-girlfriend herself) went back to go study something differently, or are pursuing work in fields quite far removed from graphic design. And then you get people who didn't study design at all making quite a big name for themselves in the practice. Speaking about the social practice of design, I believe the last time we spoke, you mentioned that hand typography is a relatively trendy stylistic approach at this moment.

Wesley: Yeah. I don't know? Maybe.

Schalk: I think you mentioned that there is a lot more of it out there in regards to illustration and design?

Wesley: Yeah. You do see more of it now, I guess.

Schalk: Ok, I just wanted to know how strongly you felt about that. Since judging from the contemporary readings I've done, people are going quite nuts about it.

Wesley: Thinking about it, there definitely is. However trends change every couple of years. Someone will do something and end up making it popular and people will start copying it. All the agencies will end up using it. But people get bored of it and it will eventually evolve and change into something else. It's like fashion I guess. But if you see for instance what *Am I Collective* and others in South Africa are doing, I guess it is very popular at the moment. What do you think?

Schalk: Well, I do think that it is very dangerous to think that there is some sense of a linear stylistic narrative in the design world. I prefer to think that there is a multiplicity of styles all running parallel at the same moment. However some of these are more prominent than others and more socially foregrounded. But I do think that the physical quantity of hand type being generated in mainstream visual communication has increased.

Wesley: Yeah. I definitely agree.

Schalk: With that being said, do you think that there is a general increase in the usage of 'folk typography' in much the same way?

Wesley: Maybe in personal work. I haven't really seen folk stuff in commercial work, but I've definitely seen it in personal work! And you?

Schalk: Well, you also have to take into consideration that I'm on the lookout for this type of thing for about two years now, since I'm doing my theory on it. But I do believe that there was a stage when I was really prominent, even in commercial work. However, it might have subsided now since the 2010 Soccer World Cup sentiment has drawn to a close. But building up to the World Cup, there certainly was an increase in this type of visual style.

Wesley: Yeah. I see what you're saying.

Schalk: I think the type of communication that made use of this visual device increased during that time.

Wesley: Yes.

Schalk: So let's talk about your own work for a bit. I've seen you mentioned that you're primarily inspired by the city that you live in.

Wesley: I think any true designer or creative person should be inspired by where they come from. It is something that you will see in any well-known designer or illustrator. For instance in something like Scandinavian design, you can clearly see that it has a degree of European influence.

Schalk: So would you say that it is important that we exercise a certain degree of influence over what source we use to draw inspiration?

Wesley: Well, if you are asked to interpret a specific culture for a brief then you are obviously using a fixed source. Then it comes down to the fact that I think a good designer is someone who is able to really understand that type of culture. That is what makes a good design and typography. That you are able to understand the cultural significance rather than merely the aesthetics. And being able to pull it off.

Schalk: Can I use two example of your work to further discuss this?

Wesley: Sure.

Schalk: The first one we discussed very quickly last time. The one that read 'soccer keeps the boys on track'. Last time you gave me a brief overview of the story behind it, but is it possible that you can, more specifically, give me an outline of the designated brief. I just want to establish what design and content choices you personally made and what was dictated by the brief.

Wesley: Well. They wanted to keep it an open brief. So all I really had to work with was the title: 'Beyond 10: What would the world look like if an African team won the global football tournament?'. So instead of thinking what beyond 2010 represents to me, I considered interviewing people in the township where I teach graphic design. I made a short film, where I asked several students questions. The one guy said that soccer keeps the boys on track. He found that, within the township, when kids are bored they get into drugs and stuff. He thought that the World Cup encouraged them to partake in positive activities such as sports and so forth. The problem was that I had two weeks to do a series of eleven images.

Schalk: That's not even 11 work-days!

Wesley: Yeah! So I had to find a cross between a style that can be done quickly, but still faithfully represents the African context. You know?

Schalk: Ok. The second image I want to ask you about. Is one in a series of three that you did for One Small Seed magazine. It is the three illustrations, each featuring one major city in South Africa. I want to discuss the 'Jozi' one for a bit.

Wesley: Ok.

Schalk: Can you perhaps give me a quick background to that? The version that I have is pretty low-res, thus I can't really make out the written material.

Wesley: Sure. The brief and timeline also played a strong role in how it was going to be executed. One Small Seed magazine sent an email out to lots of people saying that they are looking for anything on Durban, Cape Town or Pretoria. I mentioned that I'm a designer in Durban and whether they want to ask me any questions. I sent them one of my images, the map of Africa.

Schalk: Yeah. I remember that one from the City Slickers exhibition.

Wesley: Yes. They really digged it and they asked me whether I would like to do a map for each of the different cities. I wouldn't say that it was my best work, because of the amount of money they paid me, they couldn't really expect something super cool. But I wanted to give a South African vibe, especially with the typography.

Schalk: Now the best place to start on the use of the typography would probably be with the title. There are two things that I find fascinating about it. Firstly the 'J' seems a bit of an anomaly within the word 'Jozi'. Is there any significance in that or is it just a stylistic thing?

Wesley: It was something I distinctively decided to do, since it needed to communicate 'South African'. I tried to merge that African street barbershop typography with the cosmopolitan identity of the city. I don't know whether you guys have it down there, but up here I constantly see this. These guys that would take a piece of wood and they would just paint the word 'builder' and a cell phone number on with a brush.

Schalk: Yes. We have a lot of that down here as well, especially at stop streets and traffic lights.

Wesley: What I find fascinating is that I don't think you will find something like this anywhere else in the world; they will write, for instance, 'builder' but then the last letter of the word jumps to the second line.

Schalk: Yeah. I've seen it as well.

Wesley: It's pretty crazy no one would really think of doing that, especially for a title!

Schalk: Yes.

Wesley: So I started out with the intent, in the back of my head, of trying to represent the way that someone in a lower demographic would tackle the project if given the chance. So I tried to pull from that, take the letter and make it really thick. I've always wanted to create a true type font that's done with the same style and feel as those guys.

Schalk: For me as a visual reader, I got this message of elasticity and the organic nature of the city. That the identity of the city is constantly growing and changing. I think that says a lot about our own understanding of our identity as South Africans.

Wesley: You're correct.

Schalk: Secondly I believe the contrast between Braamfontein and I love Soweto is self-explanatory. I think it would be safe to say that you consciously employed the typographic treatment to create meaning. Illustrating the identity of the city - even if it is a fragmented identity. And that you used typography as way to play these cultural identities up against each other.

Wesley: Yeah. For sure!

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